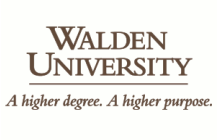

2019

Experiences of Peer Mentors Who Mentor At-Risk Students

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Nicole Danielle Miller

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

Experiences of Peer Mentors Who Mentor At-Risk Students

by

Nicole Danielle Miller

MS, Troy University, 2012

BA, Huntingdon College, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

May 2019

Abstract

With the number of underprepared, at-risk students entering college, many institutions have developed initiatives to help support student success. Previous research has shown that peer mentoring has been used to support student success, but there is limited research on the mentoring experience from the peer mentors' perspective. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of peer mentors who mentor at-risk college students at a 4-year institution. Using a phenomenological design, 8 peer mentors were interviewed. This study was built on Lave and Wegner's theory of situated learning and Zachary's 4-phase mentoring model to help explain the meaning and value that the participants attributed to their experiences. Moustakas's 7 step data analysis method was used. The results from this study suggested 5 themes that represent the peer mentors' experiences: (a) being a role model, (b) learning experiences for the peer mentors, (c) establishing accountability, (d) effective mentor/mentee communication and relationship, and (e) clarifying the role as a mentee. The participants believed they strengthened their leadership and communication skills as a result of their mentoring experience; they also placed a strong emphasis on the challenges that occur during the mentoring relationship. The participants gained an understanding of how the skills they developed would be used in their academics and future professional careers. The positive social change implications for this study included: (a) aiding in the training of future peer mentors; (b) the improvement of future peer mentor programs; (c) improved support for at-risk students; and (d) gaining new insights for other researchers searching to promote successful mentorship programs for at-risk students.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my husband, Skip, whose constant love, support and encouragement made this process possible. Thank you to the moon and back.

To my daughters, Arial, Lillian, and Skylar, thank you for being the drive I needed when I wanted to give up. I hope that I inspire each of you as you grow older. Never give up on your dreams!! I'm thankful that God chose me to be the mother of you three beautiful girls.

In addition, I must acknowledge my parents, Morris and Judy Griffin. Mom even though you are in heaven, I know you are smiling down on me. I hope I have made both of you proud. I am so lucky to have such amazing and supportive parents. I love you both!

Acknowledgments

I am forever grateful to so many individuals who have helped me and encouraged throughout this entire doctoral process. I want to publicly thank my committee members, Dr. Patricia Loun and Dr. Jane Lyons, for their continuous and insightful feedback. I will always remember each of your knowledge and dedication through educational journey will always be remembered.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Conditionally admitted students, or students with lower academic abilities, are often considered at-risk or underprepared because they enter college with low grade point averages (GPAs) and/or test scores (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). In return, they have a higher risk of departure (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). According to the ACT National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates (2010), 28% of first-year students do not return their sophomore year. Heaney and Fisher (2011) stated that this percentage is heightened for at-risk or underprepared students such as those who were conditionally admitted. Many institutions have adopted mentoring as a key component of their student support initiatives that incorporate mentoring into transition programs to create supports systems that work to aid students during their first year. Chen and Kao (2014) found that over the years, peers tremendously influence one another. In fact, peer mentoring is one of the most common, low-cost strategies used to support students and help with a successful transition to college (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). The Hobson Retention Project surveyed 17 institutions and found peer mentoring to be the top retention strategy because of the programs' ability to increase student engagement (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010). Thomas (2012) reported peer mentoring as one of the most effective intervention methods. Thomas found that peer mentoring developed *a sense of belonging* that is essential to academic success. Therefore, the mentoring concept has become a beneficial feature in most higher education institutions to help students successfully transition by creating learning communities, familiarizing students with campus resources, assisting with academics, and increasing student interaction (Beltman &

Schaeben, 2012). Peer mentoring has been shown to be an effective ingredient to support both the academic and social development of at-risk students (Fisher & Heaney, 2011).

Research has shown the benefits of peer mentoring programs in higher education, such as developing a sense of belongingness, creating social bonds, and creating positive feelings like academic motivation (Fisher & Heaney, 2011); however, there is a lack of research that has exclusively focused on peer mentors' experiences. Conditionally admitted students are immersed into a college setting that allows peer mentors to have an opportunity to support their success. The mentors' experience goes beyond textbook theories. Mentoring is an intervention mechanism to help support a unique student group like conditionally admitted students (Fisher & Heaney, 2011). This study allowed peer mentors to reflect on their experiences and provided insight on how to create a successful mentorship. By getting insight into the peer mentors' experiences, peer mentor programs can improve their support for at-risk students. The expansion of this knowledge provided additional information on successful mentoring in higher education in terms of the understanding the benefits/challenges for peer mentors, retaining at-risk students, and improving training for peer mentors. This data also offered a confirmation that peer mentor programs were a useful strategy to support at-risk students and offered new understandings on peer mentors' reflection mentoring at-risk students.

This chapter is an introduction to examine peer mentoring in higher education, in terms of different mentoring approaches, common outcomes for mentees in the mentoring relationship, and the facilitation and perception of mentoring program. The sections outlined in this chapter include the purpose of the research study, the research questions,

assumptions, scope, and limitations. This study may result in positive social change by understanding the experiences of peer mentors who mentor at-risk students. The findings from this study lead with the assumption that the peer mentors provided accurate responses to each interview question that will result in the development of better peer mentor programs.

Background

With a growing number of at-risk students entering college, it is important to look at how mentoring programs can be used to support them from the perspective of peer mentors. The findings from two studies focused on how mentoring enhanced the academic, social, or personal growth of the mentees. Colvin and Ashman (2010) identified five peer mentor approaches: connecting link, peer leader, teaching coach, student advocate, and trusted friend. These five mentor approaches were shown to have the greatest impact on mentees and focused on how or why mentors used certain approaches throughout the mentoring program (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). The researchers inferred meanings from the standpoints of the mentees and instructors and these five approaches were shown to have the greatest impact on mentees (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Research questions were selected to help understand three important areas for mentoring: five common roles for mentors, benefits/risks, and situations where power/resistance may arise (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Even these researchers found five predominant mentoring approaches, the study's findings showed that each individual had a different perspective on mentoring, such as the mentor's role (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). However, it is important to identify the various mentoring experiences and the

meaning that are associated with those experiences. In another study, Beltman and Schaeben (2012) focused on the benefits of mentoring for mentees. In fact, both studies found the same common mentoring outcomes for mentees-an increase in personal satisfaction (e.g., achievement in grades) and an increase in social satisfaction (e.g., a sense of belonging). These researchers used the self-determination theory to provide a framework to understand why peer mentors are motivated to take on their role (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). Using surveys, the researchers found that mentors reported that mentoring was associated with humanitarian benefits such as helping others, making a difference, and sharing knowledge (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). The data also found that mentors reported that they enjoyed the cognitive benefits of mentoring such as training, leadership skills, professional development, and learning about campus resources (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). Even the mentors commented about their roles in the mentoring relationship (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012), but one-on-one interviews would allow a greater understanding of the peer mentors' experiences and how this is contributed to a successful mentorship. The current research will aid in understanding the interactional nature of the relationship and how the peer mentors view this component (e.g., how do mentors view the mentoring relationship and what they did to create a meaningful experience).

At-risk students enter college with a lower level of preparedness than their counterparts. Support service models for at-risk students vary by institution; however, most at-risk students are required to take developmental coursework in math, reading, and/or writing (Stewart & Heaney, 2013). In addition, at-risk students receive some form

of additional support through a tutoring program and/or a regular meeting with an advisor or mentor (Stewart & Heaney, 2013). However, in order to expand on existing research, I sought to examine peer mentors' perspective about their experiences to determine which themes characterize successful mentorships. Although several studies have examined the benefits of mentoring, these studies did not solely focus on the mentors' experience (Kiyama & Luca, 2014; Holt & Lopez, 2014).

Peer mentor programs are extremely useful in the setting of higher education (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Fisher & Heaney, 2011; Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schabmann, Spiel, & Carbon 2011). Supporting at-risk students is a multidimensional process that begins with support services such as peer mentor programs. The use of peer mentor programs provides a strong transition strategy to help address the academic and/or social needs of at-risk students. The implementation of peer mentor programs has contributed to the success of mentees in terms of creating a sense of belonging (O'Kefee, 2013; Pearson, 2012). Pearson's (2012) contribution to the literature on how to increase student retention for higher education research students helped me to recognize the need to study the mentoring experience for at at-risk population such as conditional admits. I focused this study on the mentors' experience to address the gap in providing mentors' valuable insight of a successful mentorship. I examined mentoring from the experience of the mentor rather than the mentee.

Problem Statement

Several research studies provided evidence that the concept of mentoring has been used to support student success, but there is a lack of understanding about the experiences

and interactional function in a mentoring experience and how peer mentors describe these experiences. (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Fisher & Heaney, 2011; Leidenfrost et. al, 2011). Due to an increase in the number of underprepared students entering colleges, Colvin (2015) found that many institutions are implementing initiatives that include peer mentoring to improve student success. Goff (2011) evaluated the outcomes of a peer mentor program and found that mentees felt their participation in a mentoring program was a valuable experience and had a positive impact on their academic success. The current research expanded on Goff (2011) and other researchers' studies by understanding peer mentors' experiences mentoring an at-risk population of students. As Colvin and Ashman (2010) stated, it was important that research worked to close the gap by focusing on the perspectives of peer mentors so that educational researchers can understand each of the moving parts in mentors' experiences and provide a useful conceptual framework to understanding and analyzing the outcomes that are reported through peer mentors' experiences. In fact, researchers have even stated that few studies have focused on mentors' perspective (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011; Peck, 2012). It is important to explore the nature of the relationship between the peer mentor and their mentees from the standpoint of peer mentors to increase understanding of the experiences. Without this data, future peer mentor programs will lack the ability to effectively train future mentors and/or implement a successful peer mentor program. The experiences of peer mentors provided information about what strategies and processes are key to a successful mentorship, as well as insights on both positive and negative experiences.

Purpose

A phenomenological design was used to understand the lived experiences of peer mentors who mentor underprepared college students. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of peer mentors who mentor at-risk college students at a 4-year institution. In this study, I sought to increase understanding of the peer mentoring experience mentoring at-risk students and the process of mentoring from the mentor's perspective. The participants in this study were upper-level classmen (sophomore, junior, or seniors) who were enrolled and served as mentors at a 4-year university in Alabama. Data was collected using open-ended questions during semistructured, one-on-one interviews.

Central Phenomenon of Study

The following questions guided the study and the interview process:

1. How do peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year college describe their experiences mentoring?
2. How do peer mentors describe the process of successful mentoring?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on a qualitative framework. According to Creswell (2009), a qualitative design allowed me to build a holistic picture about a human or social problem. In this case, a phenomenological framework provided me with the contextual lens to describe, interpret and explain how peer mentors made sense of their experiences. I was able to explain the meaning they attributed to their mentoring experience. Ultimately, a phenomenological research design provided me with

an in-depth understanding of the peer mentor experience and insight into strategies support a successful mentorship. I filtered the peer mentors' experiences with an inductive approach and rich descriptions.

The theory of situated learning was at the heart of understanding peer mentors' experiences because of its focus on social interaction and the knowledge that was learned from these experiences (Lave & Wegner, 1991). Situated learning can occur anywhere but it is typically prevalent in learning experiences such as mentorship (Lave & Wegner, 1991). Learning experiences, such as peer mentoring, aligned with what is currently known about peer mentoring. Lave and Wegner (1991), in their theory of situated leaning, posited that peer mentors would situate activities to promote the success of their mentees. The theory of situated learning provided a framework to help me understand peer mentors' experiences in terms of the components that led to successful mentorship.

It was also essential to understand that learning and behavior theories provided a framework to help researchers understand peer mentor programs. Zachary's (2000) four-phase mentoring model describe four concepts or skills that peer mentors may develop throughout their mentorship: (a) preparing, (b) negotiating, (c) enabling, and (d) closure. Zachary's (2000) model helped me identify what skills peer mentors needed to successfully mentor their mentees and how they applied those skills in their mentorship.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was a phenomenological focus since qualitative research worked well with addressing the lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). Moustakas (1994) stated that a phenomenological study is used when the research is

focused on interpreting the meaning of a phenomenon and finding interconnecting meanings from the participants' experience. In phenomenology, I was essentially seeking to understand the perspectives of the participants involved. Qualitative research was consistent with seeking to gain a better understanding of the experiences of peer mentors who support at-risk, which was the center of this dissertation. For my study, I sought to explore the peer mentors' experiences and the process of supporting at-risk population of students. Semistructured, one-on-one interviews were used so that I could make sense of the mentors' experiences. Peer mentors' interviews was recorded and I took notes.

Interviews were scheduled with peer mentors who were enrolled at a 4-year institution in Alabama. The inclusion criteria were that the mentoring program was at a 4-year institution in Alabama with 8 peer mentors who were upper level classmen (sophomore, junior, or senior) who had served as mentors for a minimum of one semester. The interviews lasted approximately an hour in length. Smaller participant numbers allowed me to have a better depth of analysis. These small participants represented my purposeful sample. Purposive sampling allowed me to select my participants based on my research questions and increased the credibility of my research (see Creswell, 2009). Each interview began with me asking the mentor to describe the experiences that he or she faced while mentoring at-risk students. The same questions were used during each interview and were asked in the same order each time. However, I may have needed to ask an additional question to clarify a peer mentor's response or further explore a peer mentor's response. When the interview process was complete, I transcribed my notes by hand. I identified key passages found in each interview collected

from the mentors and code the data for common categories. This rich description during the in-depth analysis allowed this study's findings to be applied to other peer mentor programs serving at-risk students.

Definitions

Several terms were used in designing this study. The definition of these terms provided an understanding of how the data is presented and how it is interpreted. These terms include the following:

At-Risk: Students who are not academically prepared and/or cognitively prepared for college coursework. (Fowler & Boylan, 2010)

Conditionally-admitted students: Students who are considered at-risk due to their college admissions' profile with low GPAs and/or standardized test scores. (Heaney & Fisher, 2011)

Learning Community Model: A cohort style that has been used in higher education to group students together and help them successfully integrate into the college setting. (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012)

Mentee: Often a first-year college student who is likely to struggle within the college environment and has a hard time with their academic transition. (Colvin & Ashman, 2010)

Mentoring: A support tool that allows mentors to provide ongoing academic, personal, or social support for mentees. (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011)

Mentoring Relationship: A support system that can positively impact both the mentor and mentee (i.e., establish connections). (Colvin & Ashman, 2010)

Peer Mentor: A more experienced student who helps a less experienced student bridge gaps with any academic or personal challenges. (Bonin, 2013)

Peer Mentor Program: An initiative used as an intervention strategy that allows a mentor to be paired with a mentee to provide both support and guidance (Yomtov, Plunkett, Efrat, & Marin, 2015). There is an emphasis placed on fostering positive outcomes such as academic achievement and social integration. (Yomtov et. al 2015)

Situated Learning*:* A theory that focuses on how learning is developed in a particular environment and finding meaning from those experiences. (Lave & Wegner, 1991)

Assumptions

During this research process, a few assumptions were made that were critical to the support of this study. I assumed that the sample of peer mentors gave meaningful and accurate responses to the interview questions. Another assumption was that this study aided in identifying what specific skills and techniques worked to create a successful mentorship, which was reported and described in the peer mentors' interviews. This assumption was based on the idea that I maintained my role as an objective researcher and bracket any bias so that a factual experience of the peer mentors was captured, which was the focus of this study.

Scope and Delimitation

The scope of this study was limited to peer mentors who have mentored at-risk students. Creswell (2009) noted that delimitations refer to narrowing the scope of the study and stating the research boundaries. The delimitations in this study was as follows:

- Peer mentors from only one institution was recruited participants, which means that the data collected during this study is specific for that institution and the findings cannot be generalized to other institutions.
- The conceptual framework for this study was based on a cognitive approach that emphasizes learning by doing; therefore, there is not an opportunity to observe the participants in their natural setting.

Limitations

There were a few limitations in this study. Qualitative research is not objective in nature (Merriam, 2002). It did not allow me to make a causal relationship from the study's findings (see Merriam, 2002). The responses provided by the peer mentors could differ from peer mentors at other institutions.

This study did not account for differences in first-year peer mentors versus more experienced peer mentors. This information could further help to explain the mentors' overall experience. This analysis could help compare peer mentors' experiences and gain an understanding of the nature of positive and negative perceptions. For instance, more experienced mentors may use different approaches and techniques to ensure the success of their mentorship versus those peer mentors who are less experienced.

Significance

Leidenfrost et. al (2011) noted that learning community models, such as peer mentor programs, have been a supportive tool in higher education. This study helped to gain new understandings of the lived experiences of peer mentors and how peer mentors made meaning to those experiences. In return, the long-term gain was significant to

improve future mentoring programs. Without this knowledge on the peer mentors' experiences, institutions would not understand the lived experiences of the mentors supporting at-risk students (Holt & Lopez, 2014; Hu & Ma, 2010). Hall and Jaugietis (2011) also stressed that exploring peer mentors' perspectives was essential for the success of mentoring programs, which yielded academic success for both mentees and higher education institutions. In return, there will be better support for mentors to help provide ongoing effective mentoring programs. In addition, the mentors created a compass that helped them successfully navigate through their mentorship (e.g., the best strategies used to help mentees, how they worked with mentees, etc.). Data from this study showed what strategies and processes are key to ensure successful mentoring. The one-on-one interviews also elaborated on the peer mentors' reflections about areas of improvement, which will be helpful for future peer mentor program developers as well as aiding in the training of future peer mentors.

This research project is valuable and unique because the results of this study explored peer mentors' perspectives mentoring at-risk college students. Even though there is research pertaining to the use of peer mentoring as an effective support tool in higher education for at-risk students, there are limited studies that focus on a reflective account of mentors' experiences. Insights from this study will aid in recruiting and/or training mentors, providing support for them, understanding any challenges that they may face, and the improvement of peer mentoring programs.

Summary

There was significant research to support the notion of peer mentoring and its use to support at-risk students (Chen & Kao, 2012; Holt & Lopez, 2014; Hu & Ma, 2010; O'Keefe, 2013; Pearson, 2012). However, the research that existed on peer mentoring was not specifically focused on the experiences of peer mentors. Being such, the goal of this phenomenological study was to understand how peer mentors make meaning of their experience mentoring at risk students enrolled at a 4-year institution. Chapter 1 includes both the conceptual and theoretical framework for this study. A phenomenological was used to obtain an understanding of how peer mentors make sense of their experience mentoring at-risk students. Lave and Wegners' (1991) situated learning theory served as the base to help understand the peer mentors experience. The theory of situated learning allowed me to find meaning in the peer mentors' experiences and understand the components of successful mentoring. This historical aspect of peer mentoring programs and at-risk students in higher education is presented in Chapter 2 of this study. The literature review provided relevant research on the benefits of mentoring, characteristics of a mentor that can either harm or benefit the mentoring relationship, and the outcomes associated with a peer mentor program.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Multiple viewpoints have been researched on the use of mentoring in higher education. While mentoring has been shown to improve student success, little is known about how peer mentors view the mentoring experience. This problem was addressed by reviewing literature on at-risk students in higher education, programs used to support at-risk students, the implementation of peer mentor programs in higher education, and the components in a mentoring relationship. The purpose of this chapter was to review literature that supported the need to explore the experiences of peer mentors involved in mentoring at-risk students. Hall and Jaugietis (2011) stressed that exploring peer mentors' perspectives was essential for the success of mentoring programs. Since there is an influx of more students entering college underprepared, it is important to explore the success of a mentoring program from the mentors' perspective to increase the institutions' ability to support these students. In fact, researchers have even stated that the perspectives of the peer mentors have lacked being examined (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Haggard et. al, 2011; Peck, 2012). I presented a dialogue on mentoring regarding the overall importance of mentorship by highlighting how both the mentoring relationship and the mentoring role play a part in a successful mentoring program. In this section, I described the concept of peer mentors and how they are used in higher education. In this literature review, I examined the components in a mentoring relationship and provided a critical review of the best practices in a mentoring

relationship. In the last section, I focused on theories that help to align the concept of mentoring.

Literature Search Strategy

To find the literature for this research study, I used databases that covered the surface on understanding the forms of peer mentor programs that are used in higher education. The databases included in the search were Academic Search Complete, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Education Research Complete, ERIC, PyscArticles, and PsycInfo. At the beginning of the literature search, I focused on identifying the definition of peer mentoring in higher education and its use in student support initiatives. My initial goal was to find studies that used peer mentoring to help at-risk students and examine the influence that mentoring had on supporting students both academically and socially. With an absence of literature examining the perspectives and experiences of peer mentors, this research contributed to further understanding of the mentorship relationship from peer mentors' viewpoint. Keywords that were used during the literature review were*: peer to peer mentoring, first-year in higher education, student leadership, transition support services, student retention in higher education, mentoring, strategies for peer mentoring, peer support, mentorship outcomes,* and *peer mentoring relationships*.

Conceptual Foundation

My research design was based on a phenomenological approach in order to focus on the experiences of peer mentors who served as peer mentors to at-risk students. According to Merriam (2009), a phenomenological study was particularly designed to uncover strategies, techniques, and practices of individuals. I am inquiring about the

experiences of peer mentors who mentor at-risk students and the meaning that the mentors give those experiences. A phenomenological research design did not just focus on opinions or beliefs. Instead, a phenomenological research design was consistent with understanding peer mentors' experiences, which was the center of this dissertation. The theory of situated learning was the base to help me understand the peer mentors' experiences. Researchers who used the situated learning theory suggested that each peer mentor needed to situate their mentoring activities to engage the mentees through strategies that support them both academically and socially (Lave & Wegner, 1991). To better situate the activities, it was necessary to understand the mentoring experiences and strategies of the mentors. In other words, how did they situate learning for at-risk students and what strategies were successful? The experiences of peer mentors were centered on shared activity between the mentor and mentee – the activity was that of becoming a successful student – this included developing academic abilities, personal growth, and healthy school-work balance.

Lave and Wegner (1991) proposed in their situated learning theory that learning was a transitory bridge that connected knowledge with an experience. In other words, they stressed the importance of learning by doing. The main ingredient of Lave and Wegner's theory was that learning was rooted from its social environment (e.g., the interaction/relationship between the students, the resources/skills used, and the environment itself). Experiences are "experiences of meaningful structured situations" (Lave & Wegner, p. 1) Their theory enabled me to find meaning to any action, like social interactions, based on how it is experienced from a set of participants (see Lave &

Wegner, 1991). For instance, Durning and Artino (2011) proposed that the situated learning theory can be viewed as knowledge being a tool participants using a tool must know when and how to apply the tool in an environment. Peer mentors' experiences were a key example to illustrate the situation. The peer mentors used their experiences as their knowledge/tool to make sense of what they perceive as the process of mentoring and what led to successful mentoring. The mentors' experiences allowed them to provide an increased understanding of both their experiences and components of successful mentoring. In future mentorships, they may be able to use the same experiences in a different context.

Learning and behavior theories can be used to help researchers understand the application of mentoring programs. In addition, theories can be used to help program developers improve the implementation and evaluation of mentoring programs. According to Zachary's (2000) four-phase mentoring model, certain concepts and skills developed throughout the mentors' experiences. The term mentoring reflected a peer mentor's ability to guide his or her mentee in a variety of situations (Zachary, 2000). The four-phase mentoring model focused on four concepts or skills: preparing, negotiating, enabling, and closure (Zachary, 2000). This approach constructed the idea that peer mentors needed a set of skills that allow them to successfully support their mentees. According to Zachary (2000), preparing included the ability to motivate, negotiating included the ability to create reachable goals, enabling included the ability to provide effective feedback, and closure included the ability to acknowledge achievements.

Data from my study led to a greater understanding of the experiences and perspectives of peer mentors who work to support at-risk college students. Zachary's (2000) model was influential to my research because it supplemented my primary framework and helped to understand the phenomenon of mentoring. Zachary's model (2000) was ideal to help me identify how peer mentors formed and maintained a mentoring relationship that helped them to successfully support at-risk college students. Looking at the four-phase mentoring model theorists suggested that each peer mentor needed to construct their own model based on the experiences that he or she faced (Zachary, 2000). In addition, this research added to the growing body of literature that existed on exploring what experiences peer mentors face and how mentors felt about their experiences (see Hu & Ma, 2010; Jain & Kapoor, 2012).

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

At-Risk Students in Higher Education

At-risk students have an increased chance of departure from college than their counterparts. According to Laskey and Hetzel (2001), at-risk students enter college underprepared in one of the following areas: math, reading, and/or writing. The definition of being an at-risk student is strongly influenced by the student's academic background (e.g., high school GPA and standardized test scores; Laskey & Hetzel, 2001). Other factors also contribute to a student being characterized as an at-risk student. The National Center for Educational Statistics (as cited in Tito, 2007) found that first-generation students and minorities are likely to be at-risk. First-generation students are students whose parents did not attend college (The National Center for Educational Statistics, as

cited in Tito, 2007). At-risk students are less likely to attend college and/or complete their degree (Ishitani, 2006). At-risk students who do attend college often take fewer hours, which prolongs the amount of time that it takes them to graduate. On the same hand, at-risk students often must take remedial courses (developmental courses), which also affects their graduation rate. The graduation rate for at-risk students can vary (4-, 5-, 6-year graduation or not graduating at all) (Ishitani, 2006). Add summary and synthesis throughout the paragraph to fully develop it and balance out the use of information from sources.

Laskey and Hetzel (2001) stated that at-risk students lack the following traits: motivation, self-direction, effective study skills, and the ability to attend class. Laskey and Hetzel went on to say that academic support services are critical to help support at-risk students and gear them towards becoming successful students. In some instances, student support services can help at-risk students become college ready. Support services can include, but are not limited to, mentoring, tutoring, and coaching.

Programs to Support At-Risk Students

Peer tutoring is the act of one student teaching another student (Colvin, 2009). Like peer mentoring, social interaction is a key element in peer tutoring. However, peer tutoring focus on learning taking place in both social settings and in a formal setting such as the classroom (Colvin, 2009). Peer tutoring also has a wide spectrum of benefits like peer mentoring. For instance, peer tutors may provide advice to students, act as a counselor, and provide instruction on a subject. Unlike peer mentoring, peer tutoring often leads the tutor feeling confused about his or her role. Since the tutors support

undefined, many tutors question if their position is necessary. In Colvin's (2009) study, he conducted 52 interviews with peer tutors and about 10% of the tutors stated that they felt they were doing things that the instructor should do. Another 10% stated that they did things that any classmate could have done (Colvin, 2009). These findings suggested that if the role of a peer tutor is not known, then it cannot aid in the success of student support services.

Coaching programs have also been used to help with retention and student success. Unlike peer mentoring and peer tutoring, an academic coach is often a university employee whose job is to meet one-on-one with students to help improve the students' overall college experience (Robinson, 2015). Research showed that academic coaching shared the same outcomes as peer tutoring for program participants- skill development and academic success (Robinson, 2015). However, similar to peer tutoring, academic coaches also have an undefined role. Academic coaches and academic advisors are often used simultaneously. However, academic coaches cannot advise students on courses or register students for courses (Brock, 2008). Until the role of coaching is understood, it is difficult to identify what makes academic coaching a successful intervention technique. Without a clear role of academic coaches, there is a chance that support services are being duplicated. Researchers have even suggested that academic coaching may be more beneficial for a nonadult population (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green, Grant, & Rynsaardt, 2007). These researchers studied 56 students who were 16 years old (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green et. al 2007). The students received 10 coaching sessions during their academic year. The results indicated that those students who

participated in the coaching sessions had a significant increase in levels of motivation and academic achievement.

Peer Mentor Programs in Higher Education

Researchers have previously shown that peer mentoring is an effective support mechanism in higher education (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Singell & Waddell, 2010). In fact, researchers have suggested that peer mentoring was developed to meet the needs of first-year students and address retention issues (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Singell & Waddell, 2010). Terrion (2012) suggested that peer mentoring should be a metaphorical compass that supported students through their college journey. The metaphorical compass referred to the mentoring programs' ability to act as an indispensable tool to aid in student development. For example, when a mentor was paired with a less experienced student, a learning tool was created that broadens the mentees' academic experience and quality of involvement. This learning tool created a compass that educated and guided both participants to expand their knowledge that is specific to their academic environment. Peer mentoring has been implemented both formally and informally. Although Beltman and Schaeben (2012) stated that mentoring can be effective informally or formally, researchers have not been able to identify which was more beneficial. Informal mentoring did not confine the mentor to goals or outcomes; it was more of a natural relationship that occurred between the two individuals. What made informal mentoring natural was the mentor's ability to provide knowledge or insight to his or her mentee (e.g., role modeling, aiding with assignments/tasks or initiating social interactions). In contrast, formal mentoring required

the mentor to establish goals and measurable outcomes. There was also a shorter period for the mentoring relationship (Goff, 2011).

Jain and Kapoor (2012) examined the impact of formal mentoring versus informal mentoring. They found that informal mentoring was more beneficial than formal mentoring (Jain & Kapoor, 2012). Specifically, they found that the mentees were more satisfied with their academic performance (Jain & Kapoor, 2012). These differences may be accounted for due to the natural relationship that occurs within informal mentoring. The informal mentors provided their mentees with more engaging activities, such as role modeling. Therefore, social interaction was considered a strong and valuable factor in an effective mentoring program (Jain & Kapoor, 2012). Nevertheless, whether formal or informal, peer mentoring has been shown to be the basis for the support of students transitioning to college. This qualitative research study did not solely focus on interactional components in the mentorship relationship. Instead, I used qualitative strategies to uncover practices and techniques used by mentors who support at-risk students. More importantly, using a qualitative approach assisted me in identifying mentors' perspectives of which formal or informal mentoring activities most benefit mentees.

Informal mentoring tends to focus on the mentee identifying his or herself with their mentor, developing a relationship with their mentor, and student development (Jain & Kapoor, 2012). On the other hand, formal mentoring tends to focus on outcomes such as learning processing, performance improvement, and career exploration (Jain & Kapoor, 2012). Features of both formal and informal mentoring can be integrated into the

mentoring experience. In addition, both forms of mentoring allow learning and reflection to occur.

Although the question about whether formally or informal mentoring is more beneficial remains, most researchers and professionals agree that peer mentoring assists incoming freshman with academic, social, and personal difficulties (Bonin, 2013; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). These varying ideas should not be seen as identifying one form of mentoring as being better than the other. Instead, both styles of mentoring should be analyzed to identify how to create a successful mentoring experience. These ideas on both formal and informal mentoring can help with the ongoing effectiveness and development of mentoring programs.

Researchers have highlighted how peer mentoring programs foster a sense of belongingness for students. A sense of belongingness suggests that the student is involved in his or her academic setting (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). Tukibayeva and Gonyea (2014) found that students who had a sense of belongingness did better academically because they felt a sense of connection to the institution. Similarly, through a mixed methods research design, Andrews and Clark (2011) found that peer mentor programs initiated a sense of belonging from the beginning of the student's arrival on campus. In fact, 75% of the surveyed participants stated that the peer mentor program helped them to "feel a part of the university" (p. 13). However, Hall and Jaugietis (2011) stated that a sense of belongingness should not be the only indicator of whether a peer mentor program has successfully improved the transition into higher education. In particular, they stated that other important indicators could play a role in improving the

transition into higher education, such as the organization and/or delivery of the peer mentor program. The organization of the peer mentor programs accounts for the necessary resources to implement the mentoring program. When these factors are taken into consideration, both integration and social support are fostered through the peer mentor program. Integration is the ability of the student to identify with their college setting and social support are the networks that the student has created with other students (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011).

Brown (2012) intended to improve retention through peer mentor programs. Brown developed the Freshman Orientation Survey and sampled 209 students. The participants consisted of both academically ready and non-academically ready students. Brown highlighted the difference between student persistence and student departure. When colleges and universities implement support programs such as peer mentor programs, it helps to examine student persistence. In fact, Brown (2012) suggested that students expect institutions to have support programs in place. Whether these expectations are met factors significantly into student persistence. Therefore, a student's success is affected by outside means.

Importance/Impact of Mentorship for At-Risk Students

Early researchers have documented the impact of mentorship for at-risk students and found that colleges and universities began to see an influx of more at-risk students admitted. They concluded that the development of support mechanisms such as peer mentor programs, resulted in an increase in the success of at-risk students. Additionally, they reported that support services like peer mentor programs are critical for the success

of at-risk students. These students require more support than developmental coursework can provide (Fowler & Ryan, 2010; Duchini, 2015). At-risk students who participated in a peer mentor program "did better in school" in comparison to their counterparts who did not participate (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p. 131). Many peer mentor programs designed to increase student success measure the programs' impact based on the participants' GPAs.

In a meta-analysis, DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, and Valentine (2011) documented the mentor program's success by program participants' grades earned (students who fit an at-risk description). Most of the studies in this review measured academic achievement (GPA) as well. Eighteen studies found that program participants' grades were positively affected by the program. The authors also reported that those at-risk students who did not attend the program had a GPA of about 2.0 in comparison to having a 2.22 GPA to those who did attend.

In a study to evaluate at-risk students' participants in a mentoring program, Heaney and Fisher (2011) found results inconsistent with DuBois et. al (2011). Heaney and Fisher discovered that a mentoring program's success was associated with the program participants' self-regulatory learning behaviors including planning/monitoring behavior based on goals, time management, and effectively using resources rather than GPA alone. While Fisher and Heaney (2011) agreed with the previous findings that GPA should not be the sole factor identifying a mentoring program's success, they showed that whether participants developed self-regulatory behaviors was an indicator of the programs' success. For instance, students who identified with a reason for being in school

tended to have been program participants. Program participants who planned their activities and monitored their behavior had a greater level of success than those participants who did not.

Researchers found that mentoring is not a novel intervention technique used to assist at-risk students. The one on one relationship is the most common characteristic of a mentoring program for at-risk students (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Bonin, 2013). Love (2011) stated that mentoring works to "infuse a multicultural society" and meet the needs of students with diverse backgrounds (p.22). Mentoring also supports the retention of at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). The National Survey of Student Engagement's (as cited in Kuh, 2001) data revealed that of 365 four-year colleges, fall-to-fall retention increased by 5% for those involved in a mentoring program. In 2010, a similar study conducted at a college in Boston found that students who received mentoring had a 3.5% higher retention rate than those students who did not receive mentoring (Sum, Khatiwada McLaughlin & Palma, 2009).

Although researchers have shown that the mentoring experience is beneficial, clear results of mentoring are still unavailable (e.g., how mentoring works). For example, the mentoring program at Glendale Community College, The Mentoring System, targeted retention (Bashi, as cited in Mendeza & Samuel, 1991). The results of the program showed that 94.5% of the mentored students were retained the following semester. They also revealed that students who did not apply for financial aid were at the greatest risk for drop-out (Bashi, as cited in Mendeza & Samuel, 1991). Therefore, researchers cannot base the retention of these students solely on the mentoring component. It is possible that

these students could have been retained if they had received better entrance financial aid counseling.

A similar study at Brooklyn College, Teacher-Mentor Counselor, yielded the same generalizations about mentoring. The primary focus of this program was remediation development (developmental courses). The results of this study indicated that 56.8% of the students were retained and had a higher GPA than they did prior to entering the mentoring program (Bashi, as cited in Obler, Francis, & Wishengrad, 1991). Although the success of the mentoring program was recognizable, there was not a clear identification on what specifically made a successful mentoring experience. In my study, I identified how mentoring works to support student success as well as different perspectives as to what contributed to the program's success. A study on mentoring may provide a clear understanding on how mentoring is used to support at-risk students (e.g., the skills of the mentors, the benefits or barriers in the overall mentoring experience, and the dynamics of the mentoring relationships).

The Mentoring Relationship

The ultimate success of a mentoring program can depend on how receptive the mentees are of their mentor. The quality of the relationship can lessen the effect of mentoring. Whether a mentoring relationship is problematic or beneficial can determine if the program achieves its objectives. It was important to note that there are different forms of peer mentoring. Colvin and Ashman's (2010) qualitative found that all peer mentoring relationships impact both the mentor and the mentee. They found three themes from the 77 comments from their interviews: creating a support system, reapplication of

knowledge, and establishing connections. During the mentoring relationship, both parties seemed to share common benefits like "mentoring is a great service opportunity to help others, mentoring helps students feel comfortable on campus, mentoring served as a 'connecting link' to campus resources" (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p.125). Although these benefits fostered a supportive relationship that enabled effective mentorship, there were also risks that led to an ineffective mentorship. These risks may include balancing both mentoring duties or requirements, balancing personal requirements, mentees being too dependent on mentor, mentees not accepting the mentor, and mentees not wanting the help of the mentor" (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p. 129). Overall, there has been extensive research of the use of mentoring in higher education. However, Colvin and Ashman did not specifically focus on providing an in-depth understanding of the peer mentors' experience. In my research I solely focused on the peer mentors' experiences who provided support for a specialized group of students. Results from my research study offered an expansion on the focus of supporting underrepresented and marginalized students in higher education.

In a quantitative study conducted to investigate the impact of a holistic peer mentoring project for 34 freshman and sophomore students, Ward, Thomas, and Disch (2010) discovered that a holistic mentoring relationship provided even more benefits to both the mentor and the mentee. A holistic mentoring relationship provided both mental and emotional support. Therefore, both the mentor and the mentee experience growth in other areas such as reaching goals, professional career path selection, and assistance with academics (Ward et. al, 2010). Ward et. al (2010) showed why the mentoring relationship

was so important and influential in providing a support system for a mentoring programs' participants. They showed that benefits are both concrete and nonconcrete. Additionally, benefits from the mentorship created growth ranging from learning information to professional growth.

While identifying benefits as they apply to the mentoring relationship, barriers can also occur due to the mentoring relationship. Colvin and Ashman (2010) also identified risks or challenges in the mentoring relationship. In an interview they conducted with mentors, 38 of 70 comments revealed that a common risk "is the mentee becoming too dependent, using them as a crutch" or "the mentee becoming upset with the mentor and seeking revenge" (p. 130). The researchers also found that power and resistance would occur in the mentoring relationship if the mentees felt pushed into doing things that they did not want to do. The specific comments on resistance were as follows: mentees not opening up the mentor, relationship clashes, and communication issues (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). This study informed researchers on how the nature of the mentoring relationship reflected into some of the challenges that can be found in mentoring relationships. Findings from this study showed that even with a successful mentoring program, generalizations cannot be made about the benefits and risks of the program. In my research I explored different experiences that peer mentors face throughout the mentoring relationship. Although researchers have shown that peer mentoring programs have extensive benefits, it is important to discuss possible challenges and barriers as well. The success of a mentoring relationship is contingent upon the behaviors of both the mentor and the mentee. However, it is important that research does

not neglect the issues that peer mentors feel are unique in a mentoring relationship. If research neglects to understand peer mentors' perspectives, then that leaves a gap in understanding how to develop successful mentoring programs.

Summary and Conclusions

There is a need to understand the experiences of peer mentors who mentor at-risk students. Research showed how peer mentor programs have been used to address the retention and support of at-risks students. Mentoring has increased social connections, increased student retention, developed a sense of belonging, and facilitated student integration (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Brown, 2012; Pearson, 2012; Kimyama & Luca, 2014). Peer mentor programs serve many at-risk students and the mentoring relationship can be beneficial for both the mentor and the mentee. However, there is still a need to focus on the mentors' experiences. While mentoring is an ideal support mechanism in higher education, there was little knowledge on understanding the lived experiences of mentors who support "at-risk" students (Hu & Ma, 2010; Holt & Lopez, 2014). Without the knowledge of mentors' perspectives, institutions will not understand how to improve future mentoring programs. This study was structured to determine the meaning that peer mentors ascribe to their experiences. Additionally, I determined what strategies and skills peer mentors need to build a successful mentoring program. Insights from this study aided in providing support for mentors and understanding their role. Based on the peer mentors' experiences, the data from this study can aid in the development of effective mentoring programs and provide useful insight on how mentors can be successful.

To accomplish this task, I conducted a phenomenological study, described in Chapter 3: The Methodology. The methods was a semistructured, one-one-one interviews. I interviewed 8 mentors. After data collection, an analysis was conducted by coding the data to find common themes.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year institution in Alabama. There is a gap in literature addressing peer mentors' experiences mentoring a marginalized group of students such as at-risk students. It was important to explore the peer mentors' perspective because their knowledge can contribute to the implementation of future peer mentor programs and the training of future peer mentors.

This study's participants consist of mentors who was recruited from a 4-year institution in Alabama's Peer Mentor Program for At-Risk Students. The phenomenological focus was the best design to address the experiences of the peer mentors. Moustakas (1994) stated that a phenomenological study allowed me to infer meanings from participants' experiences. For these reasons, the phenomenological approach was the most effective research method to strengthen the outcomes of this research, which was to understand mentoring experiences.

This chapter included a discussion on the research design for this study, including participant selection and recruitment, data collection, a plan for data analysis, and the rationale for selecting a phenomenological design. I also discussed my role as the researcher that included relationships with the participants, any bias and ethical/privacy concerns. This chapter also discussed the research questions and internal validity.

Research Design and Rationale

According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological research design should aim to produce a rich description of a phenomenon that has been experienced by all participants. A phenomenological research design was used to understand mentoring experiences of peer mentors who mentor at-risk students. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather descriptions of the mentoring experience and were the means by which to examine the mentoring experience through first hand reports from participants who have experienced this phenomenon. The research questions were developed based on the literature review and research on peer mentor programs and at-risk students in higher education. As a result, data from the interviews were analyzed to address the following research questions that guided the study:

1. How do peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year college describe their experiences mentoring?
2. How do peer mentors describe the process of successful mentoring?

Central Phenomenon of Study

The central phenomenon in this study related to peer mentors' experiences and perceptions mentoring at-risk students, and the mentoring programs' overall effectiveness for at-risk students. Peer mentoring is a beneficial support initiative for at-risk students (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Bonin, 2013). Mentoring has been shown to support the persistence of at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Andrews and Clark (2011) also supported the importance of peer mentor programs, arguing that peer mentor programs

contribute to the mentees developing a sense of belonging and improving the transition into a college setting.

Research Tradition

This study was a phenomenological design. A phenomenological design is used by researchers to gain understanding from a group of individuals about their experiences of a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Researchers employing a phenomenological approach can use an inductive approach to understand and find meaning from the participants' point of view (Merriam, 2009). For this finished study, the phenomenon of interest was the peer mentors' perceptions and experiences about their experiences mentoring at-risk students. The peer mentors in this study were asked to share their experiences and feelings about the peer mentor program, discussed how these experiences impact their belief in the effectiveness of the peer mentor program, and explored ways to improve future peer mentor programs. I used one-on-one semistructured interviews (Appendix A) to capture the mentors' perspectives and gained insight that could help improve future peer mentor programs.

The aim of this phenomenological study was to understand the peer mentors' perspective on mentoring at-risk students and opened suggestions for future research. A phenomenological approach was a strong qualitative approach because it allowed the participants to convey rich, thick detailed descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2013), which was a goal of my study. Moustakas (1994) stated that a phenomenological research places emphasis on the experiences of the participants who encountered the phenomenon. With a phenomenological design, I desired to find the meanings that are

attached to those experiences, which meant there was not a focus on my interpretation (see Moustakas, 1994). This methodology allowed me to capture the core of the peer mentors' experiences who mentor at-risk students.

Rationale

There are a variety of approaches within qualitative research. This section justified why a phenomenology design was selected over the other types of research designs. Creswell (2009) spoke about five traditions within qualitative research: case study, ethnography, grounded theory study, narrative, and phenomenology.

Case studies are an appropriate design when the researcher is intensively examining a unit of interest such as an individual, setting, group, community, or activity (Creswell, 2009). A case study is a fitting approach when the researchers want a comprehensive data collection approach and does not want to make generalizations about the research findings (Creswell, 2009). Case studies provide an in-depth understanding of the topic. Therefore, the research may use multiple forms of data collection (Darke, Shanks, & Broadbent, 1998).

Ethnography was developed to allow researchers to study a particular society of culture (Creswell, 2009). The data in an ethnographic study is not interpreted by the researcher, but through the lens of the culture that is being studied (Merriam, 2009). This lens of the culture focuses on the beliefs, values, and attitudes of the particular society or culture. The researchers immense themselves in the field of those who they are studying (Creswell, 2009). Since the researchers are able to immerse themselves in a natural setting, it allows the researchers to make unique perspectives and distinctions about

what/who they are studying. Therefore, ethnography is extremely beneficial in research that focuses on social or cultural conditions (Creswell, 2009).

In a grounded theory research design, the researcher's goal is to create or discover a theory (Merriam, 2009). The theory that is emerged from the data is not a global perception. Instead, the theory is focused on a specific group of individuals and their response to a particular experience or situation (Creswell, 2009). Not only is the theory grounded on the topic of interest, but there is a connection between the data and the analysis of data (Moustakas, 1994). The connection between the data and the analysis of data is what makes grounded theory is a very unique research method; the researcher goes back and forth between the data collection process (identifying categories) and the analysis process (developing a theory). Therefore, the research process, including the research question, can change all together; it can be seen as a building block research process or an evolving research process.

A narrative is a useful method when the researcher is to assess the meaning of the vents through first person accounts. The main characteristic of a narrative study is that the data is in story form (Creswell, 2009). Researchers adopting a narrative design place emphasis on examining the social aspect of their experience.

A phenomenological study focuses on the essence of an experience and understanding the experience (Merriam, 2009). Using a phenomenological approach allowed me to achieve a deep understanding by examining the phenomenon through peer mentors' perspective and identifying specific accounts that can result in implementing future successful mentoring programs for at-risk students. With the use of how questions,

I was able to explore the participants' responses and the unique aspects and meanings of each peer mentor's experience mentoring at-risk students. The goal of this study was to explore and describe peer mentors' experiences mentoring at-risk students at a 4-year institution. For these reasons, the phenomenological approach was the most effective approach to expand literature by evaluating a peer mentor program for at-risk students based on the actual perceptions of peer mentors.

Role of the Researcher

For the purposes of this study, I did not have any personal or professional affiliation with the participants. It is also equally important that I provided the significance of this study. In fact, Moustakas (1994) stated that the researcher is a major instrument and must work tirelessly to develop rich, detailed data. The rich, detailed data did not come from my interview questions; instead, it came from me serving as the human instrument for data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In this role as a human instrument, it was essential that I worked to provide nonbiased, detailed perspectives from the peer mentors mentoring at-risk students. In order to ensure that I captured the full experience of the peer mentors, it was imperative that I acted as a primary instrument by (a) shaping the themes from the interview and (b) conveying the experiences of the participants in the study (see Creswell, 2009). In this role, I held an ethical responsibility as well. This included acknowledgement of any personal biases and addressing those biases (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) also noted that this communication not only laid out my intent, but it also gave my study credibility.

Due to my role as the key instrument in this research, it was equally important that I separated my experiences and any biases from the study's results. As an admissions counselor and academic advisor, I have recruited and advised students whose academic preparedness was similar to the at-risk students who was mentored by the peer mentors in my study. In my roles in admissions and advising, I have had experiences which influenced my perceptions and expectations of a peer mentor program for at-risks students. As the primary instrument in this study, I took measures to remain objective and took measures to exclude any biases that may hinder me from understanding the essences of the peer mentors' experiences. In order to accomplish this goal, I used Husserl's (1982) concept of epoche, which is also known as bracketing. Epoche ensured that my biases, personal opinions, and ideas were set aside. The process of epoche required that I examined the phenomenon from a clear, original perspective when taking notes during each interview and during data analysis to limit my bias (see Hurssel, 1982). The epoche suspended all my judgments and silenced any previous thoughts so that I could perceive the phenomenon purely and from the mentors' point of view.

I bracketed my biases by noting them in a notebook and reading them before each interview. Tufford and Newman (2010) referred to this process as memoing and stated that it allowed researchers to recognize feelings about the research. I also incorporated self-reflexity to assure transparency through the study. Moustakas (1994) stated that self-reflexity allowed the researcher to examine any personal thoughts and limit subjectivity on the data. The credibility of this data depended on my ability to remain objective and transparent.

Locke, Spirduso, and Silveman (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2009) stated when the researcher is so involved in the research, a compass of ethical and personal issues could pose a threat to the research process. This often leads to addressing any connections between me, the participants, and the research site, which is referred to as *backyard research* (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). For example, if I conduct research at my place of employment, it creates a threat to the data's accuracy and the role of the participants and me. I recruited participants with whom I have no connections; therefore, the concept of backyard research did not threaten the validity of this study.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Participation in this study was limited to the recruitment of students who were serving as peer mentors for a 4-year University's Peer Mentor Program for At-Risk Students. The sample frame for this study were mentors who were currently enrolled at the 4-year University in Alabama. They had varying majors and classifications (sophomore, junior, or senior) and had a minimum of one semester of previous mentoring experience with the 4-year University's Peer Mentor Program for At-Risk Students.

Due to the specific focus of this study on peer mentoring at-risk students in higher education, a purposive sample was used. Creswell (2009) stated that purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select both participants and the site according to the research questions and problem. I recruited 8 participants based on a criterion strategy to ensure that each peer mentor is serving in the mentoring program to support at-risk students.

Creswell (2009) stated that a small population sample was beneficial in a qualitative study. A smaller sample size was better because it adequately represented the perceptions held by the target population (Mason, 2010). A larger population sample may compromise the analysis or interpretation of the participants' descriptions. In qualitative research, saturation is also important when determining the sample size (Brown, 2008). Data was considered saturated when I felt that adding more participants did not add any new or additional information to the study (see Bowen, 2008). Saturation was also achieved when every theme had been described and each theme was reflected through each participant's experience (Mason, 2010). The sample size left me with a full understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Yin (2014) suggested a sample size of 6 to 10. Thus, my study used a sample size of 8 peer mentors.

Instrumentation

One-on-one interviews were the only tool for data collection in this study. Also, follow up questions were asked to gain any additional meaning or provide clarity. The interview process required that each participant was asked the same questions in the same order and worked to address the challenges that occur during qualitative interviews. Yin (2010) suggested several ways that the researcher can overcome the challenges that can potentially occur during the interview process. First, I made sure that I minimized my speaking and allowed each participant to express his or her experience without any interjection from me. I also made sure that I followed the open-ended guided interview questions (Appendix A) so that each participant could truly describe his or her experience. As a final measure, I made sure that I remained neutral throughout each

interview to minimize my biases. This also ensured that each participant felt comfortable during the interview. From a procedural prospective, I felt that these three approaches ensured that my approach was consistent and allowed each participant to provide an in-depth discussion about their experiences. Creswell (2009) stated that this strengthened the content validity of the study. For instance, this interview process created standardization and uniformity. In return, this made it easier to compare the peer mentors' responses. In addition, the questions were related to creating an in-depth conversation about each peer mentors' overall perception mentoring at-risk students.

Procedures

Participant Recruitment

After approval of the study by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I recruited eight peer mentors. The procedures for recruitment and participation took place with the following steps. First, I posted a flyer (Appendix B) and asked potential participants to contact me.

Data Collection

Once I received responses from prospective participants, I contacted each peer mentor by phone and verified that he or she met the inclusion criteria, which was to be currently enrolled at the 4-year university and have at least one semester of mentoring experience in the mentoring program for at-risk students. As the second step, I called to schedule the interviews with the peer mentors in a private study room at the 4-year university's library's to create a comfortable atmosphere for the participants, ensure confidentiality, and freedom from interruptions. Options included the participants

selecting a date and time that was convenient for them. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. In the third step, prior to the beginning of each interview, the participants were given an informed consent form. The informed consent outlined the title, purpose, nature of the study, procedures, risks, benefits, and confidentiality of the study. Then, I went over the consent form with the participants and allowed each participant to ask any questions that he or she may have. Once the participant stated that he or she understood the study and his or her role, then participant signed two consent forms. I kept one of the copies and the participant kept the other copy. Finally, I asked the participant permission to record the interview. All interviews were conducted using the guided questions (Appendix A). I expressed that the participant could refuse to answer any question during the interview and that they could withdraw at any time from the study without any penalty. I informed the participants that I would take notes during the interview. To ensure the confidentiality of each participant, a letter was assigned to each participant so that names and responses were not connected. After each interview, the participant could ask any questions that they may had. Also, I informed the participants that I would send a summary of my findings via email for review of accuracy of their interview. A final thank-you was extended to each participant to express gratitude for their participation.

Data Analysis

I continually self-reflected throughout the entire study. In fact, Creswell (2009) stated that data analysis should be an ongoing process that includes self-reflection (e.g., deductive reasoning and writing memos). The analysis of this study was based upon the

goal of phenomenological studies, which was to uncover participants' experiences and the meanings they attributed to those experiences.

For this study, I began the data analysis process by transcribing the audio recordings that I had of each interview. Second, I compared my transcriptions with the notes that I took during each interview. In order for me to analyze each peer mentors' experience, the I reviewed each mentor's responses so that I was familiar with the data; this was useful to identify similarities and patterns in the mentors' responses that was used help organize the data. I read each transcript and gained a general sense of words or phrases that connect to the study (see Creswell, 2009).

To aid in this process, I used Moustakas (1994) method of analysis for phenomenological data to assist in data analysis. This method increased my transparency in the coding process and increased my study's credibility. The aim of this study was to gather data that led to rich, structural descriptions of the participants' experiences. Moustakas (1994) presented seven steps for data analysis in phenomenological research. Each of Moustakas' (1994) steps was used to analyze the responses of each research participant.

1. The first step in this process was horizonalization. This process required me to identify each statement that was relevant to the research question.
2. The second step required me to eliminate irrelevant expressions, which was called reduction and elimination. In this process, I determined if each statement fit two requirements: it contained information that was necessary to

understand the phenomenon of interest, and it could be labeled and abstracted. If the statement did not meet those two requirements, then I eliminated it.

3. The third step involved clustering common themes of the experience. The purpose of clustering was to arrange the data into common themes that represented the core of the experience. Each theme was explained using verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews.
4. The fourth step of the process was to validate each theme. Validation included checking each participant's transcript for the following: (a) if its stated directly in the participant's transcript, (b) if it was not directly stated, then I checked to see if it was compatible with the transcript, or (c) if it was not compatible, was it relevant to the participant's experience.
5. The fifth step included synthesizing the themes that develop *textural descriptions of the experience*.
6. The sixth step of this process included me reflecting on all the data and developing a *description of the structures of my experience*.
7. The final step of the analysis procedures included me constructing a descriptive summary of the meanings and essences of the experience. The shared experiences among the participants were highlighted. The goal was to provide rich descriptions that allowed the reader to realistically understand what the experience was like mentoring at-risk students.

Through this process, I created meaning of the peer mentors' responses. If there were any discrepant or contradictory findings, I cross-referenced with both the audio recordings and transcriptions to ensure that all points of view are presented.

Data Presentation

The results of this analysis was presented using a combination of both excerpts from the interviews and tables. The reported themes represented the collective, shared perspectives found within the reports of the peer mentors' experiences. The themes that are reported in this section outline the structure for the results chapter. The themes were organized based on the research question that they address.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Creswell (2009) listed eight primary strategies that can be used to strengthen validity in qualitative research and recommended that qualitative researchers engage in at least two of them. The credibility of a study refers to the degree the study's findings are accurate (Merriam, 2009). To improve this study's credibility, I used reflective journaling described by Creswell (2009) to create an open narrative about my interpretations. These interpretations allowed the reader to gain a holistic sense of my interpretations and helped build justification of the study's themes.

Member checking was also used to help strengthen the credibility of my study. Member checking was used to verify the accuracy of my transcriptions of the participants' interview (see Creswell, 2009). This procedure involved asking the

participant to read a summary of my findings and verify accuracy. This was an opportunity for them to correct any information and/or add any information.

Transferability

The ability of the reader to make judgments about the study's findings and decide if the findings are applicable to other settings or individuals is referred to as transferability (Creswell, 2009). The sample size for this study was smaller so that the I could fully understand the peer mentors' experience. Based on the methods that were used to ensure the study's credibility, the data and theme analysis were subjective and generalizability of findings is limited to other peer mentor programs that support at-risk student. The use of rich, thick descriptions also helped add to the transferability of this study's findings.

Dependability

Dependability referred to the study's consistency or reliability (Creswell, 2009). I increased this study's dependability through the use of triangulation. I used my hand notes of the participants' accounts of the phenomenon as well as audio tapes. Dependability concerns were also addressed by using an audit trail. An audit trail was used though the use of my journal notes of each interview. In a notebook, I recorded observations and reflections from each one-on-one interview. This process allowed the reader to see how themes were formed.

Confirmability

Confirmability referred to my ability to remain objective and not taint the results of the study based on my personal biases. I addressed the issue of confirmability by using

the interview process which required me to use the guided interview questions for each interview. I also remained objective during the interview process by memoing. Memoing allowed me to inspect my feelings about the research and developed deeper meaning about the data. An important use of memoing was its ability to allow me to record reflective notes that were used to help enhance data exploration (see Tufford & Newman, 2010). I used memoing by noting my biases in a notebook. Prior to each interview I read over my biases that are noted in the notebook. This helped to ensure that the data is free from bias. I also addressed confirmability through the use of epoche. Epoche requires a researcher to be transparent with myself and put aside all prejudgments that may interfere with a fresh perspective on this phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). Prior to each interview, I read over my biases that I had noted in a notebook. This included my answers to the interview questions that I asked each participant. This process helped me to identify my biases and bracket them before data collection and data analysis.

Ethical Procedures

Before I began to conduct the study, I obtained permission from Walden University's IRB and the 4-year university's in Alabama IRB to ensure that the study was ethical. I also obtained written permission from the Coordinator of the Peer Mentor Program to conduct the study recruiting 4-year university's in Alabama students and the campus library's Individual Private Study Room.

I recruited 8 peer mentors who were a part of the 4-year university's Peer Mentor Program for At-Risk Students. Prior to the beginning of each interview, I went over the consent form with each participant and allowed them to ask any questions that he or she

had. They were reminded that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time. During the interviews, I considered the protection, rights, and welfare of my participants.

I ensured that ethical guidelines were upheld and ensure the participants' protection. The informed consent form was important to guarantee that the participants were informed of all aspects, benefits and risks of the study (Creswell, 2009). The information gathered from the peer mentors was kept anonymous and confidential. I protected the peer mentors' names and any other identifying information. The transcript notes were coded as Peer Mentor A, Peer Mentor B, Peer Mentor C and so on.

I worked at the 4-year institution in Alabama in the Office of Academic Advisement and advised undergraduate freshmen. There was no conflict of interest between myself and the participants because the I did not have previous direct or indirect contact with the peer mentors. In discussing my professional experience and in order to ensure that the research was conducted ethically, the research was conducted with a program and department in which I did not have any professional affiliation. Participants recruited for the study were upper classmen and were advised on their academic courses by a designated staff member who worked in a separate office.

All collected data was stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home. Additionally, the paper copy of the consent forms and interview transcripts was filed in the locked filing cabinet. Any computer data was also password protected on my personal laptop. Access to any data was limited to myself and my research committee. After seven years,

the audio tapes will be burned, my notes will be destroyed with a shredder, and the computer files will be deleted.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the methodology of this research, which included the research design and rationale, the institution where the research was conducted, participant recruitment and sampling, and how the data was collected with interviews. In each section of this chapter, I laid out how the study was implemented so that the reader clearly understood the details and basis of the research design. This phenomenological research design explored peer mentors' perspective on mentoring at-risk students at a 4-year institution. I selected a phenomenological research design to convey answers to each research question that guided this study. I created a set of six interview questions that were used to gain a detailed, rich analysis of the peer mentors' experience in terms of (a) their perceived effectiveness as mentors of the peer mentor program, (b) skills/resources needed to create a successful mentorship, (c) positive aspects of the peer mentor program, and (d) negative aspects of the peer mentor program. The study also addressed improvements that could improve the effectiveness of the peer mentor program for at-risk students. Further discussions included data analysis and the assurance of ethical protection for the participants. Chapter 4 presented the process to generate and analyze the data which included themes and patterns that were found in the collected data.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year institution. The phenomenological approach allowed for rich, detailed descriptions to be gathered to capture the experiences of the peer mentors. The two primary questions under investigation were the following: (a) How do peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year college describe their experiences mentoring, and (b) how do peer mentors describe the process of successful mentoring?

Setting

This study was conducted at a 4-year college in Alabama. The institution is a public coed university with a total enrollment of 4,727 in the summer of 2018 when this study was conducted (Fact Book, U.S. News, 2018). Currently, the institution admits 150-200 at-risk students into a peer mentor program; these students are paired with a peer mentor as a support tool until they are moved out of conditionally admitted status.

I conducted all interviews in a private study room at 4-year college in Alabama, which was located at the campus library. I selected this location because it was a familiar setting for each of the peer mentors and provided privacy for each interview. A quiet location was needed to ensure there would be no interruption, allow the interviews to be audio-recorded, and help the peer mentors feel comfortable sharing their mentoring experience.

Demographics

The participants in this study were all current students at a 4-year college in Alabama who had a minimum of one semester of peer mentoring experience in the 4-year college's Peer Mentor Program for at-risk students. The participants included 8 peer mentors at the 4-year college. Table 1 lists the demographics for each peer mentor. A letter was assigned to each peer mentor to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

	Classification	Gender	Semesters as Peer Mentor
Peer Mentor A	Junior	Female	2
Peer Mentor B	Junior	Male	2
Peer Mentor C	Junior	Female	2
Peer Mentor D	Senior	Female	1
Peer Mentor E	Junior	Male	1
Peer Mentor F	Senior	Female	2
Peer Mentor G	Junior	Male	1
Peer Mentor H	Junior	Male	2

Data Collection

The process of data collection began after Walden University's IRB approval (December 6, 2018, approval number 12-07-17-0359238) and then 4-year college's IRB approval where the study was conducted (May 21, 2018, approval number 2017186). Eight participants were recruited via flyers and contacted me via email for their voluntary participation. After the participants contacted me via email, I called each participant to verify that he or she meet the inclusion criteria. Once I confirmed that each participant was a current student at the 4-year college in Alabama and had served as a peer mentor

for a minimum of one semester, I asked them for their availability. Once I received, all dates and times that were convenient for each peer mentor, I secured the private study room in the 4-year college's library for one day. Using epoche, I addressed confirmability by answering each of the interview questions and reviewing my answers before each interview session. At the beginning of the session, I reminded the participants that the interview would be audio-recorded, and I reiterated the purpose of the study and how their experiences would allow me to increase an understanding of peer mentors' experiences mentoring at-risk students and determine what factors create a successful mentoring program. Next, I reviewed the informed consent form with each participant, and each participant was allowed to ask any question(s) before he or she signed two copies of the informed consent form: one for them to keep and one for me to keep. This interaction took 10-15 minutes and allowed for rapport building with each participant. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. There were no variations in the data collection plan described in Chapter 3.

During each interview, I started the audio recorder and used an interview guide (Appendix A) of six open ended questions for each interview to create uniformity; however, I also posed probing questions such as "Can you explain?" based on the participant's response in order to explore their comments or ideas. For instance, if the peer mentor answered a question about the strengths of the Peer Mentor Program for at-risk students with a three-word response such as "the mandated techniques," then I followed up with a question that asked what kind of mandated techniques. At the end of each interview, I thanked each participant for his or her participation and asked if they

had any additional thoughts or questions. None of the participants provided any additional information.

To ensure the accuracy of my transcriptions of the interviews, I gave each of the eight participants a summary of their interview transcript to read and review. Each participant confirmed that the transcripts were accurate. All of the audio recordings, field notes, and peer mentors' contact information are stored at my home in a locked cabinet and will be kept for 5 years.

Data Analysis

The transcript analysis process in this phenomenological study focused on identifying the meaning of the peer mentors' experience mentoring at-risk students. This analysis process was used to reveal textual descriptions and meanings in the peer mentors' responses. First, I transcribed my audio recordings of each interview within a week to ensure the originality of the peer mentors' experiences were not lost. I placed the words *Peer Mentor A, Peer Mentor B, Peer Mentor C,* and so on at the top of each transcription. Then I compared my transcriptions with the notes that I took during each interview. I found no discrepant cases. Next, I read over each peer mentors' responses so that I became familiar with the data. Then, I color coded similar words or phrases that were found in the peer mentors' responses. The color coded similarities and patterns in the peer mentors' responses helped me to organize the data into five themes: (a) being a role model, (b) establishing accountability, (c) effective mentor/mentee communication and relationship, (d) learning experience for peer mentors, and (e) clarifying the role as mentee.

To increase the study's credibility, I used Moustakas's (1994) seven-step data analysis method. The first step of this process was horizonalization. This process required me to identify each statement that was relevant to one of the research questions (see Moustakas, 1994). Next, I eliminated irrelevant statements based on the following requirements: whether or not it was necessary to understand the peer mentor's experience mentoring at-risk students; and if it could be labeled and abstracted (see Moustakas, 1994). The third step in analysis involved me clustering the data into one of the five themes that represented the core of the peer mentors' experiences (see Moustakas, 1994). Each theme was validated and explained with verbatim examples from the one-on-one interviews to ensure that it was relevant to the peer mentors' experience. The last steps in Moustakas's analysis process involved looking at the four identified themes and each of the peer mentor's statements that I had identified as being relevant to the research questions. In this step, I confirmed again the color-coded words and phrases that I had identified previously. This phenomenological reduction process allowed me to review the data multiple times to examine frequency and salience of data. In order to achieve a clear and concise representation of the peer mentors' experience, I became fully immersed in the data after numerous readings of the interview transcripts, reading my notes, and listening to the recorded interviews.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

To help strengthen the credibility of the study, I used member checking. This procedure involved each participant reading a summary of his or her interview and

checking to see that I provided a true depiction of what he or she said during the interview (see Creswell, 2009). This was an opportunity for participants to correct any information and/or add any information. The biggest benefit of member checking was that it allowed me to verify the accuracy of my findings, which increased the credibility of my study. Each participant read over his or her interview summary and agreed that the summary reflected his or her experience and feelings.

Transferability

The ability of the reader to possibly transfer a study's findings to other settings or individuals is referred to as transferability (Creswell, 2009). The sample size for this study was smaller so that I could fully understand the peer mentors' experience and to allow the reader to decide if this study's findings were applicable to them. I provided rich, thick descriptions of the peer mentors' experiences, which added to the transferability of this study's findings to other peer mentor programs that support at-risk students. The verbatim words of the peer mentors were used in the Data Analysis and Findings section in Chapter 4.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the study's reliability. I increased this study's dependability by consistently following the data collection process described in Chapter 3. I also increased the study's reliability by using triangulation. I used my hand-written notes of the participants' interview responses as well as audio tapes to help verify my data and particular details that the peer mentors provided. I also used an audit trail. An

audit trail allowed me to keep track of my notes during each interview and allowed me to identify that there were no discrepant cases.

Confirmability

Confirmability related to my ability to remain objective throughout the course of my research study. I addressed the issue of confirmability by using a structured interview process which required me to use guided interview questions for each interview. I also remained objective during the interview process by journaling, which allowed me to record reflective notes in a notebook.. This helped to ensure that the data were free from bias. I also addressed confirmability through the use of epoche. Epoche requires a researcher to admit any predispositions and reduce the effect of any biases that the researcher may have had (Moustakas, 1994). I employed this strategy by answering each of the interview questions myself prior to conducting the interviews. Then, before each interview, I read over my answers. This process helped me to identify my biases and bracket them before data collection and data analysis.

Results

This section illustrates the themes that emerged from the peer mentors' experiences, exploring how the peer mentors made meaning of their mentoring experience. Five themes aligned with the two research questions are listed in Table 2. The *being a role model* and *learning experiences for peer mentors* themes illustrated how peer mentors described their experiences mentoring at-risk students. The *establishing accountability*, *effective mentor/mentee communication and relationship*, and *clarifying*

the role as a mentee themes described what factors the peer mentors felt described the process of successful mentoring.

Table 2

Themes Emerging from Research Questions

Research question	Themes
Research question 1: How do peer mentors who mentor at risk students at a 4-year college describe their experience mentoring?	1) Being a role model 2) Learning experience for peer mentors
Research question 2: How do peer mentors describe the process of successful mentoring?	3) Establishing accountability 4) Effective mentor/mentee relationship and communication 5) Clarifying the role as a mentor

Theme 1: Being a Role Model

A benefit that was expressed repeatedly throughout the data was that peer mentors felt that their mentoring experience was enjoyable because of the level of involvement with the mentees. This benefit tied into how the peer mentors described their experiences mentoring at-risk students. For instance, in responding to the question about how they would describe their experience mentoring at-risk students at a 4-year institution, Peer Mentor C described the experience as

> Great, because I still have students that see me as a role model and ask for advice and help with classes. I learned about each one of my mentees. I spent the entire summer learning something about them...and not just the ones assigned to me. I felt like we were role models and some students clicked with a mentor they may not have been assigned and still gave advice like on college, life, or whatever to

> help them transition from living under their parents' roof to living on the 'yard'. Aligned with the idea of role modeling, when asked what feelings they associated with their experience they had as a peer mentor, Peer Mentor A stated, I feel like I was in a leadership position and it was up to the mentor to serve as an outlet to their students [mentees]. My job was to make a lasting impressing on them so they could enjoy the 'Hornet life'.

The peer mentors' experiences of being a role model showed that they saw themselves as a resource to their mentees. In other words, they thrived by giving assistance to their mentees and were not a crutch to their mentees. Each peer mentor provided ongoing support to their mentees to help the mentees feel a sense of connection and a trusted source of information and support.

The theme of *being a role model* illustrated how peer mentors described the personal impact that the mentoring experience had on the peer mentors during their experience mentoring at-risk students, which answered Research Question 1. This theme highlighted how peer mentors viewed their role as a peer mentor and took both a responsibility and a stance to make a positive influence during their peer mentor experience. Their various mentoring experiences aided in them not only feeling like a peer mentor, but also like a role model whose mentees were looking up to them. As a role model, the peer mentors took on a personal responsibility for their mentees and took a leader stance during their overall mentoring experience.

Theme 2: Learning Experience for Peer Mentors

The peer mentors also described their experience mentoring at-risk students as a

learning experience for themselves. Each peer mentor provided statements about the benefits of serving as a peer mentor to at-risk students. Each statement describing the experience mentoring at-risk students was explained as a *learning experience*. During the interviews, the peer mentors focused on their mentoring experience preparing them professionally for their future careers. Peer Mentor E stated,

> The mentoring experience benefited me as I prepare to be a high school teacher and now, I like to know first-hand what to expect with like dealing with different personalities. It's one thing to act out conflict resolution scenarios and read about that stuff in a book but it's on a whole other level when dealing with it.

Similarly, Peer Mentor A noted the significance that the peer mentoring experience provided her with professional development. She stated,

> As a future educator, programs such this one allows me to get a firsthand glimpse into the classroom experience. I would even do this again next year because I am forever indebted to summer enrichment program due to it playing a pivotal role in my development. Also, with a year under my belt, I am now equipped maturely to assist the next group of Hornets matriculate through the Peer Mentor Program.

Mentors believed that their participation in the peer mentor program resulted in them growing as individuals. Peer mentoring was an opportunity to help with their development and learning new things. These opportunities allowed them to get out of their comfort zones and appreciate each students' [mentees] differences.In addition to providing professional development, the peer mentors received other tangible benefits, such as job satisfaction. In many of the interviews, the peer mentors described the peer

mentor experience as both a professional and social learning experience. Tied in with Interview Question 1 about their experience mentoring at-risk students, Interview Question 3 asked the peer mentors what feelings they associated with the experience they had as a peer mentor to at-risk students. Their descriptions were still consistence with words such as great, enjoyable, and amazing because they felt their mentoring experience gave them both personal satisfaction and the confidence to succeed in other avenues. Peer Mentor F commented on these benefits in the statement,

> This opportunity allowed me to show my skills as a future high school coach. I am grateful to have been selected for this experience. It gives me great pride that my university is willing to reach out and assist students that society will be able to count on. This program was truly a blessing for me to be able to help students make something of themselves.

Peer Mentor H added, "I really am proud to have been part of a part of a program that has done and is doing so much to help students become successful." Peer Mentor D also highlighted the *greatness* in this learning experience with the comment,

> I loved the fact that the Peer Mentor Program gave students a second chance at obtaining a college education, more importantly an education at the 4-year college in Alabama. The program was designed to give students an opportunity to obtain college credits all the while taking basic classes to be fully admitted into the university with their peers. I love the fact the students [mentees] were given mentors to help them transition.

The advantage of the learning experience for peer mentors gave them a sense of

accomplishment. The peer mentors' learning experiences allowed them to recognize the value in their mentoring relationships to ensure their mentees' success. Many of the peer mentors assisted with mentees' academic work and any other transitional issues that may have occurred.

The theme of *learning experience for peer mentors* also illustrated how peer mentors described their experience mentoring at-risk students, which answered research question one. This theme described the overall personal impact during the peer mentors' mentoring experience. The peer mentors not only identified professional development as a learning outcome of their mentoring experience, but they also identified learning from challenging situations during their mentoring experience. Peer Mentor D also expressed her learning experience during challenging situations with the comment,

> Now I know to definitely be more selective about the information I exchange with students because things can get twisted and boundaries get crossed. I would try to be less of a parent figure and allow the students to make their own mistakes. I would also listen more than I respond because I learned that action does not deserve a reaction.

The data that emerged from this theme reflected the mentoring experience was a two-folded learning experience for the peer mentors- both personally and professionally.

Theme 3: Establishing Accountability

The theme of *establishing accountability* is a factor that the peer mentors felt created a successful peer mentoring experience, which addressed research question two. This theme highlights that structure was seen as a vital component of a successful peer

mentoring experience. While much of the Peer Mentor Program was positive, all of the peer mentors felt difficulties occurred when concrete requirements were not in place. When asked what changes they would like to see regarding the overall effectiveness of the peer mentor program for at-risk students, each of the peer mentors expressed the value in the peer mentors "keeping track of scheduled events [with sign-in sheets and more required activities] so that they [the mentees] could learn how to move through the University with knowledge and confidence and cut back on push-back." The peer mentors felt that accountability could be created through having techniques in place such as sign-in sheets, which would have made sure that mentees didn't question if a task or event was required or not. This theme addressed any strain that could occur during the mentoring experience as a result of confusion from the mentees. Without accountability, the peer mentors believed it could be difficult to create a successful peer mentor experience.

Several of the peer mentors stated that accountability was factor that created a successful mentoring experience. When asked to describe the strengths of the Peer Mentor Program, Peer Mentor B expressed that the "Peer Mentor Program offered structured guidance and accountability to the students through study halls, study skill workshops, movie nights, etc." In fact, all 8 of the peer mentors wanted to see more mandated techniques, such as weekly reports, implemented in next year's Peer Mentor Program. Peer Mentor D stated that "weekly reports would be a better way to keep up our students and their academics." Each peer mentor expressed the importance of the mentees attending social activities because they add to their educational development. Consistent

with the idea of establishing accountability, Peer Mentor B, Peer Mentor E, and Peer Mentor F also articulated that sign-up sheets should be at all the events to make sure that the mentees are getting all of the opportunities that are being offered to them. Peer Mentor F, even went further by stating that "those who do not attend will have their name reported to the Program Coordinator for disciplinary action...that way the mentors can hold their students accountable for their actions." The peer mentors' statements indicated that a successful approach to the peer mentor program would be to mandate all scheduled activities. Without the mentees' full participation, they were missing out on learning opportunities the events and to learning from their fellow mentees and their mentors.

Theme 4: Effective Mentor/Mentee Communication and Relationship

The peer mentors also felt that a successful mentoring experience was created by having both effective communication with their mentees and an effective relationship with their mentees. Almost each peer mentor attributed an effective mentor/mentee communication and relationship as a significant element in an effective mentoring relationship. When asked, "what factors do you believe created a successful mentoring experience?" each of the 8 peer mentors commented "having a good relationship with your students and vice versa." In fact, Peer Mentor D and Peer Mentor F emphasized having a "balanced mentor/mentee relationship." *Balanced* is the key word. For instance, when asked about the challenges of the Peer Mentor Program, Peer Mentor D stated,

> The downfalls were due to miscommunication between the students and myself. Like I would definitely be more selective about the information I exchange with the students because things can get twisted and boundaries get crossed. I would

> try to be less of a parent figure and allow students to make their own mistakes. I would listen more than I respond because I learned that every action didn't require my reaction.

The peer mentoring experience allowed the mentors to learn how to successfully work with their mentees. The peer mentors seemed to focus on communication as an important factor in the mentoring experience and they seemed to learn from their mistakes which seemed to be a powerful experience for each peer mentor.

When asked what aspects were the most challenging of the Peer Mentor Program, 5 of the 8 peer mentors' responses focused on the concern that their "mentor and mentee relationship was tested." Peer Mentor A went on to state that "the students [mentees] did not respect the mentors because of proximity in age. The students were still my peers and often times I experienced some push back like trying to get them to obey the curfew." Peer Mentor C even stressed that sometimes she felt "that her students felt as though she was their babysitter and that put tension between us. Like they felt like I was trying to be their parent and not their peer." The peer mentors' responses indicated that they were open to improving the mentoring program. In fact, their direct contact with their mentees seemed to give them a better understanding of their mentees' needs and wants.

When asked, "what changes would you like to see regarding the overall effectiveness of the Peer Mentor Program?" Peer Mentor E stated that he would "like to see more interactive relationships between the mentors and mentees. I feel like fun activities would help the experience be more pleasurable for students..like um hands-on activities like scavenger hunts and the Family Feud game. Then maybe they wouldn't see

us as strictly babysitters and they could feel like they could be themselves." Peer Mentor D also stressed that she would like to see more interaction with the students [mentees] to help with team building...like a small trip to Wal-Mart on the weekend. This would also help with their self-formed cliques. Because I would definitely rotate the group in each activity."

Mentors seemed to recognize that the amount of interaction between the mentors and mentees was influential to the success of the mentoring experience. Acknowledging the value in interactive relationships between the mentors and mentees were key responses, which showed that more learning may occur if the mentors and mentees interact more with each other. In return, this interaction may also help with relationship building and an increase in smooth transitions for the mentees.

The nature of the mentor and mentee relationships also helped to recognize another component of a successful mentoring experience. When asked to describe their peer mentoring experience, 6 of the peer mentors commented on implementing a screening process for the mentees before they are accepted into the mentoring program. Peer Mentor E had a very strong belief that the screening process would help alleviate some of the "push-back" they received from the students [mentees] with the comment,

> The idea of the Peer Mentor Program for at-risk student is great and I applaud all parties that participated in allowing these students to get a second chance at their education and to get a positive start in college. However, I don't like that any one is able to be admitted in the program. Constantly, mentors struggled with students that didn't want to be there and did not put their full effort into the program. I

> believe that we should interview the students prior to them coming into the program. I believe strongly that if we do the interview process we can make sure we have students that are fully committed to the program and the benefits of mentoring.

The peer mentors' responses indicated that they recognized that it was important that the mentees wanted to be there and wanted to be a part of the mentoring program. The success of the mentoring program definitely relied on the mentees wanting to learn how to be better students.

It was interesting to note that the same focus is on establishing an effective mentor and mentee relationship through the interview answers to questions 2, 5, and 6. This discovery shows that peer mentors may need additional training to help tackle certain problems that may arise. In return, this could help peer mentors have a better mentor and mentee relationship because the peer mentors would be knowledgeable on how to handle individual situations that happen with their mentees. Each peer mentor was required to attend a two week training session provided by the 4-year college's Peer Mentor Program Coordinator that covered public safety training, conflict resolution, team building, etc.; however, the peer mentors' answers show that peer mentor training should be a continuous process.

The theme of *effective mentor/mentee communication and relationship* is a second factor that the peer mentors believed created a successful mentoring experience, which also answered research question two. This theme explained how each peer mentor felt the importance of connecting with their mentees and creating healthy boundaries. The focus

on the peer mentors' relationship with their mentees was a necessary piece of the puzzle to keep a *balanced* and successful peer mentoring experience. This theme suggested that the peer mentors shared a common perspective – the way they connect with their mentee and their interactions can be credited to understanding effective peer mentoring relationships.

Theme 5: Clarifying the Role as Mentee

The final theme that emerged from the data addressed the final factor that the peer create a successful mentoring experience. This theme addresses the mentees' mindset regarding being assigned a peer mentor. The peer mentors' comments stemmed from the peer mentors feeling that a beneficial change to the program would be to let the mentees know beforehand about being assigned a peer mentor. Before taking the peer mentor position, each peer mentor was given a copy of their job description, duties, roles, and responsibilities to sign and keep. The job description contained statements such as "provide guidance," "help navigate through campus life," "provide tutoring," "do nightly room checks," "monitor class attendance," and "assist with problems." Therefore, each peer mentor knew what was expected of them. The peer mentors felt these guidelines or expectations should be given to the mentees before they arrived to the program. The guidelines should offer information on time commitment; what to discuss with their mentor; and other suggestions for a successful mentor/mentee relationship. It is interesting to note that the peer mentors shared that opinion that they felt they were beneficial to the mentees; however, they felt that it should be made clear that the

mentees' commitment to the program required them to be assigned a peer mentor. Peer Mentor F, expressed the following,

> Make it clear like in the first brochures that are sent out to the students that they will have a mentor and also make it clear that they have to listen to the mentors. A lot of students [mentees] did not even know they were gonna have mentors. Maybe like two weeks before the program, the mentors should be able to call the mentees and introduce themselves. So they would know when they get here already.

The mentors' experiences showed that they could identify a number of strategies to help improve future mentoring programs. Throughout the mentoring process, the mentors saw various occasions to enhance clarity for the mentees. Clarity for the mentees would strengthen the connections that the mentors had with their mentees. This clarity would also make it easier to establish and maintain mentor/mentee relationships.

The second layer to this theme emphasized the stressful feelings that were at-times associated with being a peer mentor (e.g., the push-back discussed in interview question 4 & interview question 6). The data reflected a variety of positive feelings that were associated with being a peer mentor for at-risk students. However, when it came to communicating with the mentees about being assigned a peer mentor, the peer mentors felt there should have been an orientation style setting that introduced the peer mentors and assignments and provided specifics in regards to what would be expected and allowed.

The theme of *clarifying the role as a mentee* was another factor that the peer mentors believed created a successful mentoring experience, which also addressed research question two. Each of the peer mentors' statements describing the weaknesses of the Peer Mentor Program and the challenging aspects of the Peer Mentor Program seemed to focus on descriptors such as "push back" and "being on one page with each other." It's important to note that the peer mentors felt that a beneficial change to the program would be to make sure that the mentees were aware of the peer mentor programs' expectations (e.g., being a mentee and being assigned a peer mentor). They felt these changes would help alleviate some of the challenges that they faced as a peer mentor. Peer Mentor B even stated that "their initial meeting should explain the purpose of the Peer Mentor Program and what is expected from them as a mentee." This final theme identified that the mentoring experience helped the peer mentors realize how important it is for mentees to know and understand the guidelines/requirements of the Peer Mentor Program before their arrival on campus. Clarification was an important concept expressed by the peer mentors. The data that emerged from this theme emphasized that the peer mentors felt that *clarifying the role as a mentee* was another key piece of the puzzle that helped to create a successful mentoring experience by keeping the mentees from under-valuing their peer mentor and eliminating the push-back that surfaced.

Summary

The findings of this study answered two questions: (a) how do peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year college describe their experiences mentoring? and (b)

how do peer mentors describe the process of successful mentoring? Analysis of the data resulted in five themes that described the experiences and perceptions of peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year institution. The themes of *being a role model, establishing accountability, effective mentor/mentee relationship, learning experience for peer mentors, and clarifying the role as a mentee* represented the key descriptions of successful mentoring that exist within the phenomenon of a peer mentor program for at-risk students. In responding to research question one, which was how do peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year college describe their experiences mentoring, the peer mentors' interviews showed that the peer mentors described their experience as *being a role model* and a *learning experience for the peer mentors.* The theme *being a role model* shows that the peer mentors' mentoring experience provided them with a valuable opportunity and experience to take on a personal responsibility for the success of their mentees. The peer mentors also identified their mentoring experience as a *learning experience*. They each described how mentoring helped them grow for their future careers. Their mentoring experience also helped to develop or strengthen skills for other leadership opportunities and/or their future career (e.g., dealing with multiple personalities and conflict resolution). In responding to research question two, which was how do peer mentors describe the process of successful mentoring, the peer mentors' interviews showed that a successful mentoring experience should *establish accountability*, *have effective mentor/mentee communication and relationship*, and *clarify the role as a mentee*. Most of the peer mentors expressed that *accountability* was an important part of a successful peer mentor program. Specifically, they expressed that they

would enhance *accountability* by implementing sign-in sheets for all required events. The sign-in sheets would not only create structure for the peer mentor program, but it would also strengthen the overall objective of the peer mentor program, which is to improve the development of the mentees. An *effective mentor/mentee communication and relationship* was also an important part of a successful mentoring experience. The peer mentors stated that it was important to set healthy boundaries, yet, still create a working relationship where the mentees will approach them with their issues. The peer mentors strongly focused on having a *balanced* relationship. *Clarifying the role as a mentee* showed the peer mentors' perspective on what changes could help create a better experience during the mentoring program. The peer mentors wanted to ensure that each mentee understood the structure of the peer mentor program and the expectations of being a mentee. Chapter 5 presents a Summary of Findings, Implications of the Results, Limitations of the Study, Recommendations for Future Research, and Conclusions from the Study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year institution. A phenomenological study was used to understand the lived experiences of peer mentors who mentor at-risk students. Students who are at-risk enter college underprepared with a lower level of preparedness in comparison to their peers (Stewart & Heaney, 2013). Previous research on peer mentoring outlined how peer mentoring is used to support and retain at-risk students, but there is a lack of research exploring peer mentors' perspective on the mentoring experience. This study explored peer mentoring experiences and identified the components that lead to a successful mentoring experience. The following research questions guided the interview process: (a) how do peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year college describe their experiences mentoring, and (b) how do peer mentors describe the process of successful mentoring?

From the interview data of peer mentors, two themes emerged related to the first research question: *being a role model* and *learning experiences for the peer mentors.* During the one-on-one interviews, the participants described the experience of mentoring and offered reflections on how their overall experience gave them an opportunity to be a role model. The peer mentors were able to see the worth in their role through the leadership part they played with their mentees throughout the program (i.e., the supportive relationship they formed with their mentees and helping with classes).

Several of the participants stated that working as a peer mentor was a learning experience because they strengthened their communication skills and conflict resolution, which helped them to become successful in how they handled challenging situations. In some interviews, the participants even stated that their experience gave them insight into how to work with their mentees, such as, knowing what information to disclose with their mentees and learning about not crossing boundaries when talking to their mentees. The learning experience that the participants described also led to job satisfaction. The peer mentors seemed to take on a personal ownership with their role by helping students adjust to the university life. As a result of their learning experience, the job satisfaction that the participants described also seemed to be fueled by the personal development that the mentoring experience had on the peer mentors. For instance, the participants learned professional skills related to their future career interest (i.e., Peer Mentor F wanting to become a future coach).

From the interview data of peer mentors, three themes emerged related to the second research question: *establishing accountability*, *effective mentor/mentee communication and relationship*, and *clarifying the role as a mentee*. Establishing accountability with each mentee was seen by the participants to help with some of the challenges they faced during the peer mentor program. For instance, during the interviews, the participants stated that if procedures like sign-in sheets were in place, they could help alleviate the mentees questioning if they had to attend certain activities. In return, the mentees would learn and grow from the activities, which was the overall goal of the peer mentor program.

The peer mentors in this peer mentor program also felt that effective mentor/mentee communication and relationships were important in creating a successful mentoring experience. An effective mentor/mentee relationship and communication, in this case, was described in the interviews by the participants as having a balanced relationship between the peer mentor and mentee. The participants stated that having a balanced relationship would also help to minimize problems and situations that may occur (i.e., miscommunication). A balanced relationship was also about making connections with their mentees. They considered a balanced relationship as one that had healthy boundaries and open lines of communication. During the interviews, the participants stated that mentoring was not just about making sure their mentees attended class and mandatory classes, but also about forming a relationship with them. For instance, they wanted to see more interactive activities between the peer mentors and the mentees (i.e., game nights).

Interpretation of the Findings

Theme 1: Being a Role Model

Each participant had a unique experience and expressed his or her experience as a peer mentor as being a role model. This finding is aligned with Lave and Wegner (1991) who stated that experiences create an internal meaning. Lave and Wegner's theory provided me the opportunity to recognize and understand the value of the peer mentoring experience to the participants in my study. The theory of situated learning (Lave & Wegner, 1991) provided a premise to help me understand why the peer mentors seemed to have a learning experience through their role as a peer mentor. Lave and Wegner

(1991) suggested that peer mentors, or anyone who is engaged in a social context similar to mentoring, would learn meaningful information because they were encountering challenges that were similar to their day-to-day life. The notion at the heart of situated learning is that learning is meaningful when it provides an individual with an opportunity be a part of and learn through from an engaged situation. It was important for me to remember that situated learning emphasized social interaction that allowed an individual to move to the center of a social context, such as mentoring, and piece together an understanding on how to make a situation successful (see Lave & Wegner, 1991). The participants in my study described how they gained meaningful knowledge as a peer mentor through the problems they had to solve and their sense of growing professionally (i.e., knowing how to speak and act with their mentees). As the theory of situated learning creators explained, the individuals' identity with their role allowed them to click or mesh within their environment to make it successful and look for areas of improvement Lave & Wegner, 1991). The participants seemed to internalize how they described their mentoring experience. The act of peer mentoring was described as an important experience that provided the peer mentors an opportunity to see that their role had a deeper meaning. The participants described this new awareness almost like a chain reaction and stated that they could not expect the mentees to do things that they did not do, such as going to class on time and meeting dorm curfews. Identifying themselves as a role model is consistent with research that mentoring is beneficial because of the natural interactions and engaging activities, such as role modeling (Jain & Kapoor, 2012). Jain and Kapoor (2012) focused on whether or not informal mentoring was more beneficial

than formal mentoring or vice versa. They found that informal mentoring was more beneficial because of the interactive components, such as, mentor and mentee interactions and student development (Jain & Kapoor, 2012). While their research focused on the aftereffects of formal mentoring versus informal mentoring, this concept can be extended to understand why the participants saw themselves as being a role model when they described the experience of being a peer mentor in the current study. Being a role model gave the peer mentors a personal responsibility and ownership of their experience and it helped to shape the interactions that they had with their mentees. This theme illustrated how the participants understood the term peer mentor. Their identification of being a role model is consistent with previous research that mentoring programs that had peer tutors and peer coaches found it difficult to identify their roles (Brock, 2008; Robinson, 2015). Without clear roles, it can decrease the success of the mentoring programs (Brock, 2008; Robinson, 2015). However, the participants within my study seemed to take value in helping their fellow peers and coining Terrion's (2012) view that mentoring is a metaphorical compass that aided in student development and expanded the mentees academic experience.

Theme 2: Learning Experience for the Peer Mentors

Through the concept of situated learning, or creating meaning to their experiences, it can be understood how the participants acquired professional and personal skills. The process of a learning experience for the participants was an evolving experience for the peer mentors. This theme expanded on Colvin and Ashman's (2010) findings that the mentoring relationship provided both the mentor and the mentee with

benefits, such as creating a support system, reapplication of knowledge, and establishing connections. In my study, the participants benefited from the three benefits that Colvin and Ashman stated and saw growth in other areas as well. The participants' belief that their experience was a learning experience described not only what was going on during the peer mentors' experience as they became better students, better role models, better communicators, better colleagues, and better professionals, but it also represented what occurred during the peer mentor program itself- development and growth. Specifically, this finding focused on the benefits that the participants associated with their experience mentoring at-risk students. Some of the benefits included enhancing conflict resolution skills; learning how to deal with different personalities; and providing preparation for their future careers or other campus leadership opportunities. These benefits for the peer mentors were consistent with Ward et. al (2010), who discovered that the mentoring experience is beneficial for both the mentor and the mentee. They found that a holistic mentoring relationship provided both concrete and nonconcrete benefits for the mentor and the mentee (Ward et. al, 2010). These benefits could range from selecting a career to learning new information. The findings from Ward et al.'s (2010) study could be extended to the participants' experience in my study. The participants' experiences provided hands-on experiences that may or may not have had an immediate benefit in their academic or professional career. Their learning experiences was described in a way that would help them in their future careers and deal with real life situations such as dealing with frustration. These learning experiences could also help future peer mentors as they prepare to become mentors. Although these learning experiences may not be

exact experiences of future peer mentors, they suggested areas of improvement for future mentoring programs. This theme also highlighted the importance of the four-phase mentoring model that suggested that each peer mentor would construct their own model based on his or experiences. The participants' experiences in my study served as catalyst to help future peer mentors understand their role as a peer mentor and may influence their decision to become a peer mentor. Also, the participants' experiences in my study adds to the growing literature that explores the peer mentors' experiences and how they feel about their experiences (Hu & Ma, 2010; Jain & Kapoor, 2012).

Theme 3: Establishing Accountability

I used Zachary's mentoring model (2000) to interpret data and understand that the peer mentors in my study could establish accountability and set the tone at the beginning of the mentor and mentee relationship. In some interviews, the participants stated that concrete requirements should be in place to address some of the challenges that occurred. Based on the participants' perspective in the current study, accountability from the mentees could create a better experience during the mentoring program. This finding suggests that the participants in my study should prepare their mentees for the mentoring relationship (see Zachary, 2000). For instance, the participants recommended the use of sign-in sheets for each activity and weekly reports. This is where the idea of Zachary's mentoring model would become important. In time, the mentee would likely respect their peer mentor and the rules that were in place. Ultimately, the peer mentors expressed that lack of accountability from the mentees can lead to an unsuccessful mentoring experience. In using Zachary's mentoring model, the peer mentors would enhance

accountability as the mentees attend each activity. Once accountability was established through structure, then the peer mentors should not need the use of sign-in sheets to force mentees to attend events. Accountability was not only important to help the mentees achieve the goals of the peer mentor program, but it was also an important concept to create an effective mentor and mentee relationship, which is the next theme. These two themes helped to describe a successful peer mentor program: effective mentor and mentee relationships would help create accountability and vice versa. This theme is also in alignment with the findings of Laskey and Hetzel (2001) who stated that at-risk students lack traits, such as self-direction, effective study skills, and the ability to attend classes. Laskey and Hetzel went on to say that mentoring is a component to help support at-risk students become successful students. The participants in my study also believed that establishing accountability was essential to help mentees successfully transition into college. Without accountability, the peer mentors also expressed that they would have a hard time getting the mentees to "do better in school" (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p. 131). Additionally, this theme was inconsistent with previous findings that GPA should not be the sole factor in indicating a mentoring program's success (DuBois et al., 2011). In fact, this theme showed that a mentoring program is successful when it helped with the development of the following behaviors in its participants: self-regulatory behavior, planning, time management, and effectively using resources (Heaney & Fisher, 2011).

Theme 4: Effective Mentor/Mentee Communication and Relationship

The theme was consistent with Colvin and Ashman's (2010) emphasis on the importance of the mentoring relationship and supported the idea that the mentoring

relationship can either benefit or hinder the success of a peer mentor program. In fact, it can be found in the participants' responses that they described an effective mentor and mentee relationship as helping their mentees feel connected, helping them with classes or personal problems, respecting boundaries, and creating friendships. The one-on-one relationship that the participants described was the most common characteristic of a mentoring program for at-risks students (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Bonin, 2013). This balanced relationship would help to meet the needs of their mentees, which was also important (Love, 2011). Previous researchers have shown that mentoring was beneficial and that 94.5% of students who were mentored were retained the next semester, but it did not show clear results (i.e., how mentoring works) (Bashi, as cited in Mendeza & Samuel, 1991). However, this theme showed how mentoring worked by making sure the mentees felt a sense of connection to their peer mentor.

Colvin and Ashman (2010) also identified both challenges and benefits that could arise when trying to provide mentor support. Challenges identified by the researchers were as follows: mentees not being open with their mentor; poor communication; and relationship clashes (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). While Colvin and Ashman's research focused on the challenges from the mentees' perspective, their findings could be extended to the participants' experience in my study. For instance, the participants' in my study experienced some of the same challenges in Colvin and Ashman's study (i.e., resistance from the mentees if they did not want to attend an activity. In some instances, the participants also experienced instances where the mentees were not being receptive to their peer mentor. The participants' experiences reinforced the importance of bridging the

gaps about the generalizations regarding the challenges and benefits of peer mentor programs. Specifically, the findings from this theme showed how important it was to discuss new and different perspectives on the challenges that peer mentors faced. As a support tool for at-risk students, the participants described how important it is for the mentees to buy into the overall mission of the peer mentor program, and not just a specific task, such as attending scheduled activities.

Theme 5: Clarifying the Role as a Mentee

Clarifying the role as a mentee was also consistent with Zachary's four-phase mentoring model (2000) and showed the importance of each of the four stages during the mentoring relationship. Each stage ensured that a clear focus is created and maintained during the relationship. For instance, during the first phase, the *preparing phase*, the mentor could give the mentee an opportunity to state the goals and objectives of the peer mentor program; then the peer mentor could allow the mentee to state how these goals impact their role as a mentee (Zachary, 2000). But during the second phase, *the negotiation phase*, the peer mentor may want to restate what the guidelines were in the peer mentor program (Zachary, 2000). During the third phase, the *enabling phase*, the peer mentor could reflect on the mentee's role and provide any constructive feedback on adjustments that could help improve their relationship (Zachary, 2000). Clarifying the role as a mentee described the process of creating a positive relationship with the mentees, which would help alleviate tension in the mentor and mentee relationships. This finding brought a different perspective to previous research that suggested if the role of the peer mentor is not established, then a peer mentor program would be unsuccessful

(Colvin, 2009). This theme shows that the role of a mentee is equally important in the success of a peer mentor program. In this theme, the participants described how they encountered difficult situations, but they also addressed improvements that could be made for future peer mentor programs, such as meeting with the mentees before the start of the program.

These five themes represented the experiences of the peer mentoring who mentored at-risk students at a 4-year college in Alabama. The themes helped identify how to create a successful mentoring experience and improve future peer mentoring programs from the peer mentors' perspective. This study contributed to the larger body of quantitative research on peer mentoring. Each of the interviews from the peer mentors in the Peer Mentor Program for At-Risk students were in line with previous research which showed that peer mentoring was a beneficial tool that had numerous benefits such as increasing students' sense of belonging and student integration (see Brown, 2012; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Kimyama & Luca, 2014; Pearson, 2012). In another study, Beltman and Schaeben (2012) also focused on the benefits of mentoring for mentees (i.e., personal growth). These researchers also identified challenges that could occur during mentoring experiences, such as, the mentees becoming upset, relationship clashes, or communication issues (Beltman and Schaeben 2012). In my study, some of the peer mentors experienced one of more of the above experiences. Also, my study's qualitative approach provided a clear understanding of what specific benefits and challenges come from the mentorship. The findings of my study contributed to the ongoing dialogue on the use of peer mentoring in higher education by adding the peer mentors' perspective,

experiences, and an overall understanding of the mentoring relationship. The five new themes that emerged from the peer mentors' experiences in my study, in addition to the current themes in literature, contributed to creating a comprehensive understanding about the peer mentors' role and creating a successful mentoring experience. Understanding the perspectives of the peer mentors may be important when recruiting and training future peer mentors or when developing new peer mentor programs.

Theoretical Implications

These findings were in agreement with the Four-Phase Mentoring Model (Zachary, 2000). Zachary suggested that a successful mentoring experience would go through four phases: preparation, negotiation, enabling growth, and closure. These phases were important to assist with growth and accountability in the mentoring experience. The data showed that it was important to define the mentor and mentee relationship at the beginning stages and work to maintain an effective mentor and mentee relationship. The participants did not state verbatim any of these four phases; however, the data indicated the mentoring relationship would naturally reflect these four stages and lead to a successful mentoring experience.

The themes of establishing accountability and clarifying the role as a mentee could represent the first phase, "preparation" and the second phase, "negotiation" During the "preparation" phase the peer mentor could express his or her expectations and be clear about what is expected (i.e. clarifying the role as a mentee). Zachary (2000) described this phase as the self-awareness stage that allows the mentor to understand his or her role. During this stage, the mentor would also have a conversation with their

mentees and determine how to create an effective relationship (Zachary, 2000). The need for the preparation phase was evident when the participants were asked what changes they would like to see regarding the overall effectiveness of the peer mentor program for at-risk students. They felt that an orientation-style meet and greet would be beneficial. This orientation would act as the preparation stage, which would allow the peer mentors to introduce themselves to their mentees (see Zachary, 2000). In addition, they could lay the foundation for their relationship. The "negotiation" phase could allow the peer mentor to reinforce ground rules such as the time and place of scheduled events (i.e. establishing accountability). Zachary (2000) describes this phase as the business plan for the relationship. During this stage, the mentor and mentee would set the ground rules for their relationship and establish boundaries, meeting times, responsibilities, and expectations (Zachary, 2000). The need for the negotiation phase was evident when the participants were asked how they described the process of successful mentoring. The use of the "negotiation" phase would allow the mentor and mentee to discuss details that could create challenges in the mentoring relationship (Zachary, 2000). For instance, the participants found that one challenge that was created during the mentoring relationship was due to miscommunication. This phase would be extremely beneficial in setting the tone for the mentoring relationship. For instance, the peer mentors could tackle some of the issues that they experienced, such as, setting the tone for a balanced relationship; spelling out how to create healthy boundaries; and establishing effective lines of communication.

The final two states are also important in creating and maintaining a successful mentoring experience. The "enabling" phase could allow the peer mentor to reflect on the mentoring relationship and make any necessary changes to ensure both the mentors and the mentees had a meaningful experience. The "closing" phase could allow the mentor to evaluate the effectiveness of the mentor and mentee relationship and acknowledge the mentee's growth. The phase would be extremely helpful in helping to create positive feelings between the mentor and mentee. Zachary (2000) described the "enabling" phase and "closing" phase as ongoing phases that allowed the mentor to reflect on the progress and success of the mentoring experience. The need for these two phases was evident through the participants' need to have continuous training on strengthening their conflict resolutions skills and other problems that could arise. The experiences during each of these phases provided more than textbook finings and can help improve support for at-risk students. These findings, along with the improvements suggested by the peer mentors could also be beneficial to future mentoring programs.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included the use of qualitative methods at only one participating university and not accounting for participants' previous mentoring experience. One of the limitations was the use of a small participant size of peer mentors at only one university. As described previously, the sampling technique was purposeful to recruit those students who could contribute to this study's two research questions. Because of these factors, it is unlikely that each of this study's findings would transfer to other institutions or other mentoring programs. Also, since the peer mentors voluntarily

participated in this study, their experiences may not represent all peer mentors' experiences. I confidently believe that my research study represented the overall experiences of the mentors for this peer mentor program for at-risk students; however, even more insight could be given with all of the peer mentors who participated this this peer mentor program for at-risk students. This study's findings cannot be used to say that any one event or variable is directly influenced upon another event or variable. However, the information provided by the peer mentors regarding mentoring at-risk may be useful to other institutions or peer mentoring programs. The second limitation was not accounting for the differences in the peer mentors with one semester of mentoring experience versus peer mentors with more than one semester of mentoring experience. If this study had accounted for the peer mentors' previous experience, then their responses and experiences may have differed. This study focused on 8 peer mentors who participated in the peer mentor program for at-risk students for a minimum of one semester and used a semistructured interview approach to gain an understanding of how the peer mentors made meaning of their experience. While the study gathered rich information about the peer mentors' experiences, I am not able to say with certainty that there would not have been differences in peer mentors' responses who had been a peer mentor for longer than one or two semesters. For instance, did peer mentors who had been a peer mentor for more than one semester have less "push-back" from their mentees? Did their experiences and perspectives change since they had been in the peer mentor program longer?

Recommendations

While this study described the experiences of peer mentors who mentored at-risk students, it is also equally important to capture a holistic understanding of the peer mentors' experiences that examined why the peer mentors chose to become peer mentors and how this may or may not have influenced their experiences. The present study discovered that mentors who mentored at-risk students described their mentoring experience as being a role model and a learning experience for peer mentors. Future research may also include peer mentors' previous mentoring experiences and examine the differences in the success of their mentees. For instance, do peer mentors with more than one year of mentoring experience, face some of the same challenges as the participants in my study. While some of these challenges that occurred during the participants' experiences are addressed in my study, they did not serve as the focal point of my study and would be useful to gain a holistic understanding of the peer mentors' experiences. Specific recommendations, based on the experiences of the participants who participated in my study, are as follows:

- Future research questions could address the peer mentors' perspective on the improvement of their mentees in the areas of self-direction, study skills, and class attendance.

- Evaluate the peer mentors' prior mentoring experiences and how these experiences influenced their mentoring approach (i.e., the mentoring relationship as addressed by Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

- Compare how the peer mentors' mentoring experience specifically impacted their professional career path.

Another interesting approach to this research would be to examine other institutions who have a similar peer mentor program for at-risk students. Based on the themes that were discussed in my study, it would be valuable to discuss the similarities and differences between the peer mentors' experiences at the various institutions (i.e., the peer mentors' perspective on their role as a mentor, the mentor and mentee relationship, etc.). Other peer mentor programs may provide additional information as to what aspects of the program are essential to create an effective peer mentor program. Multiple perspectives from other institutions could also be useful in determining whether or not peer mentors' experiences in my study is consistent with peer mentors' experiences at other institutions.

Implications

This study has implications for the development of future peer mentor programs for at-risk students. The findings from this study can be used to refine peer mentor programs and strengthen the training and recruitment methods for future peer mentor programs. As previously discussed, several participants provided suggestions to help improve the peer mentor program and create a successful peer mentor program. Those suggestions, which included, establishing accountability, creating effective mentor/mentee relationship, and clarifying the role as a mentee, provided a valuable starting point to continue to understand how peer mentor programs could effectively support a marginalized group of students like at-risk students from the perspective of the

peer mentors. For instance, these 8 participants' experiences could be used to inform perspective peer mentors about the benefits and challenges from participating in this peer mentor program.

Finally, this study could provide an avenue to help identify clear indicators of what made a successful peer mentor program. While the participants were asked how they described the process of successful mentoring, there is a need to focus more on monitoring the success of a peer mentor programing based on its programming. For instance, did their mentees have a greater level of success than those who were at-risk but did not participate in the program? If so, what activities and workshops were in place that helped with the success of these mentees (i.e., financial aid workshops, amount of study halls, remediation development, etc.).

Based on the experiences of the participants in this study, specific recommendations to develop future peer mentor programs for at-risk students or improve existing peer mentor programs for at-risk students are as follows:

- The project coordinator should create training session(s) that include strategies for each of the stages in Zachary's (2000) Four Phase Mentoring Model; understanding how to be an effective "peer mentor" and what an ineffective "peer mentor" is; conflict resolution skills; and discussing various challenges that may occur.

- Encourage peer mentors to create a *balanced* relationship with their mentees to help create effective mentoring relationships. A balanced

relationship is critical to create healthy boundaries and healthy communication.

- Discuss how to create *Learning Experiences* (see Lave & Wegner, 1991) that will create successful mentorship. This discussion will help peer mentors take ownership over creating a successful mentorship.
- Make being a mentee an option: give the mentees the guidelines of being in the peer mentor program and allow them to meet with their peer mentor program before the start of the program.
- Acknowledging *being a role model* and *learning experiences for peer mentors* as key responses in how peer mentors describe their experience mentoring.
- Acknowledge the value of establishing accountability, effective mentor/mentee relationships and communication, and clarifying the role as a mentee as key responses in how the peer mentors describe the process of successful mentoring.

Conclusion

This phenomenological qualitative study was used to explore the experiences and perceptions of peer mentors who mentored at-risk students at a 4-year institution. The two research questions posed for this study were: (a) how do peer mentors who mentor at-risk students at a 4-year college describe their experience mentoring and (b) how do peer mentors describe the process of successful mentoring? The findings were presented

in Chapters 4 and 5, including the demographics of the peer mentors. The one-on-one semistructured interviews provided insight on the peer mentors' experiences and how they made meaning of their experiences. This data was then organized by immersing myself into the data and using Moustakas (1994) seven-step data analysis. Five emerging themes were identified and described: (a) being a role model, (b) establishing accountability, (c) effective mentor/mentee communication and relationship, (d) learning experience for peer mentors, and (e) clarifying the role of the mentee.

Based on the experiences of the participants, the reported data provided unique examples of what the peer mentors believed successful mentoring is, as well as the benefits and challenges of the peer mentor program. With more colleges accepting students who are not college-ready, research must continually broaden our understanding on peer mentors' perspective mentoring at-risk students. It would be beneficial for peer mentor program developers to use the participants' experiences in my study as a form of recruitment. The experiences of being a role model and a learning experience for the peer mentors could help target the perceptions of peer mentors who are on the fence about whether or not to become a peer mentor. Also, the participants' experiences in this study could help peer mentor programs improve in the overall experience for both the mentees and the peer mentors. If future peer mentors understand that their role is help others and give back to their campus (i.e, being a role model) and that the mentoring experience would benefit them in the areas of communication and conflict resolution (i.e., learning experience for the peer mentors), then both peer mentoring programs can be improved and services to at risk students can be improved.

The participants provided suggestions for improving the peer mentor program for at-risk students. The participants in my study found the following areas to be important in a successful mentoring program: establishing accountability, effective mentor/mentee relationship and communication, and clarifying the role as a mentee. While these were the perceptions of the participants in my study, those suggestions started an insightful starting point to create successful mentoring experiences for both the peer mentor and the mentee. Knowing the participants' experiences in this program could help better prepare future peer mentors in this program. These perspectives of the peer mentors could help to effectively aid in the development of their mentees (Terrion, 2012). With the factors of accountability, effective mentor/mentee relationship and communication, and clarifying the role as a mentee, a peer mentor program developer could improve on the organization of delivery of a program. These areas provided an understanding on how mentoring successfully works to support at-risk students and offers an expansion on what peer mentors' feel are important in a mentoring relationship. For example, participants who learned lessons in effective mentor/mentee relationship and communication explained the need for a balanced relationship. This could provide insight to help minimize the challenges that peer mentors face and improve how the peer mentors' face challenges as they arise.

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Appendix A: Semistructured Interview Questions

1. How do you describe your experience mentoring at-risk students at a 4-year college?

2. What factors do you believe created a successful mentoring experience?

3. What feelings do you associate with the experiences you had as a peer mentor to at-risk students at a 4-year college?

4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the peer mentor program for at-risk students?

5. What changes would you like to see regarding the overall effectiveness of the peer mentor program for at-risk students?

6. What aspects were the most challenging of the peer mentor program?

Appendix B: Flyer

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON Peer Mentor Program

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study for my Walden Dissertation:

Peer Mentors Perception of the Peer Mentor Program for At-risk students

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to: **interview one-on-one**

Your participation would involve **1** session, which is approximately 60 minutes.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Nicole Miller
Doctoral Candidate

The study has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Review Board, Walden University.